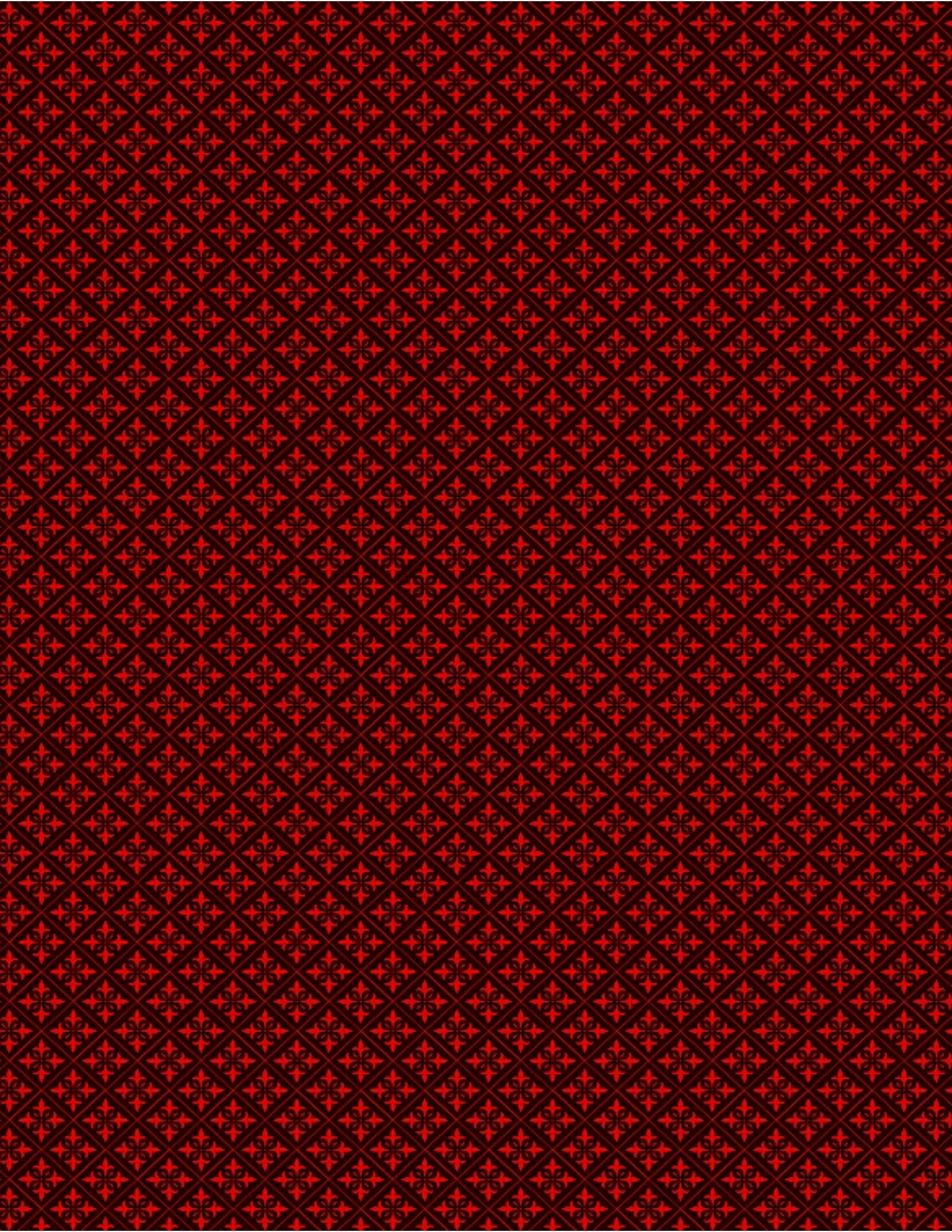
Jim Henson's™

THE STORYTELLER™

Witches



Jim Henson's™ THE STORYTELLER™ Witches

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TELLER™

Witches

The Magic Swan Goose & the Lord of the Forest

Written & Illustrated by

S. M. Vidaurri

The Snow Witch

Written & Illustrated by

Kyla Vanderklugt

The Phantom Isle

Written & Illustrated by

Matthew Dow Smith

Vasilissa the Beautiful

Based on the unproduced ***The Storyteller*** *teleplay written by*

Susan Kodicek and Anne Mountfield and revised by Anthony Minghella

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Jeff Stokely

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Lettered by

Ed Dukeshire

TALE ONE COVER

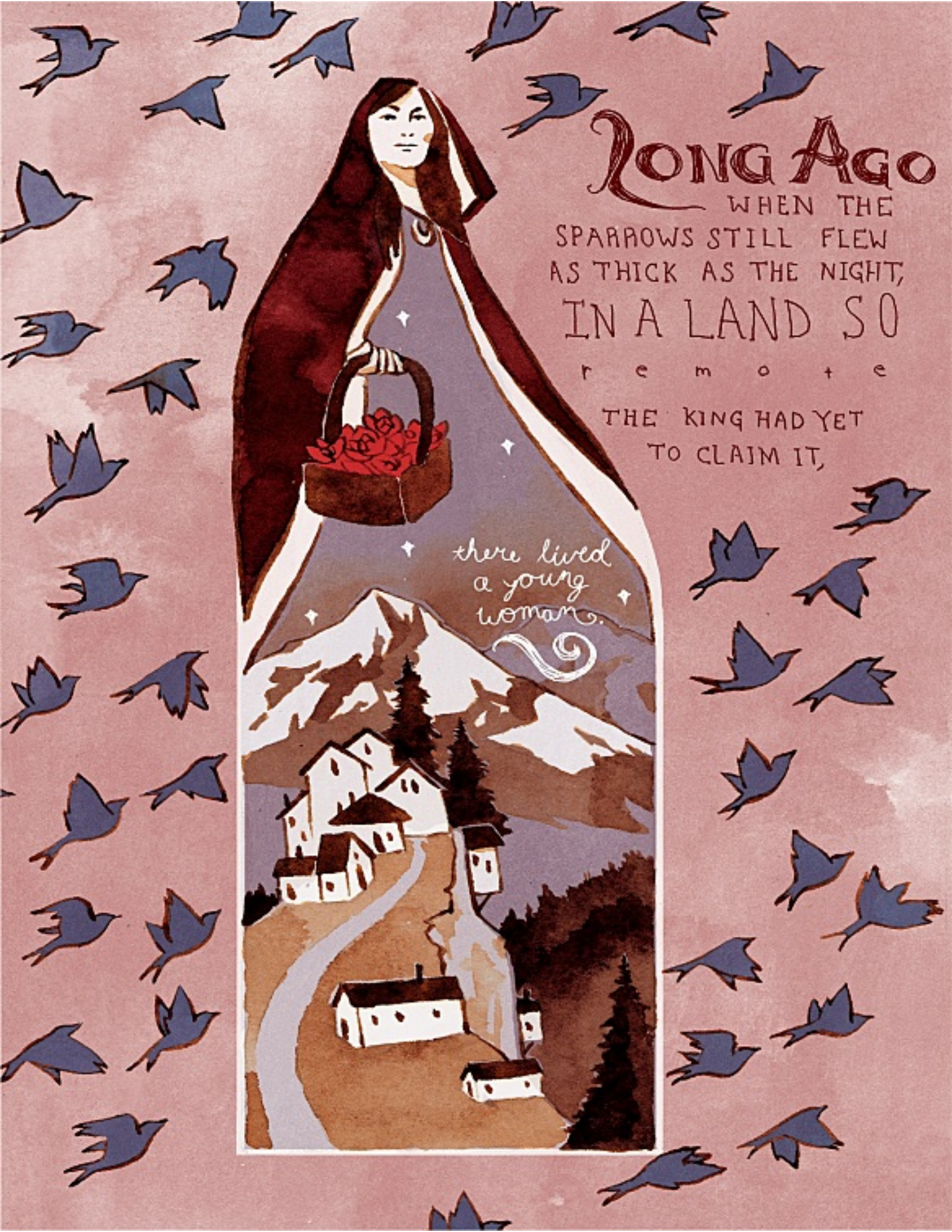
S.M. VIDAURRI

The Magic Swan Goose and the Lord of the Forest

What fascinates me about witches is that people used to actually believe in them. There was anti-witch legislation. People were put on trial and many died. That is completely different from other fantasy creatures, like Goblins, Werewolves and Vampires. I think that's what makes witches feel more plausible to us, because for a time, they were a very real fear in the public consciousness.

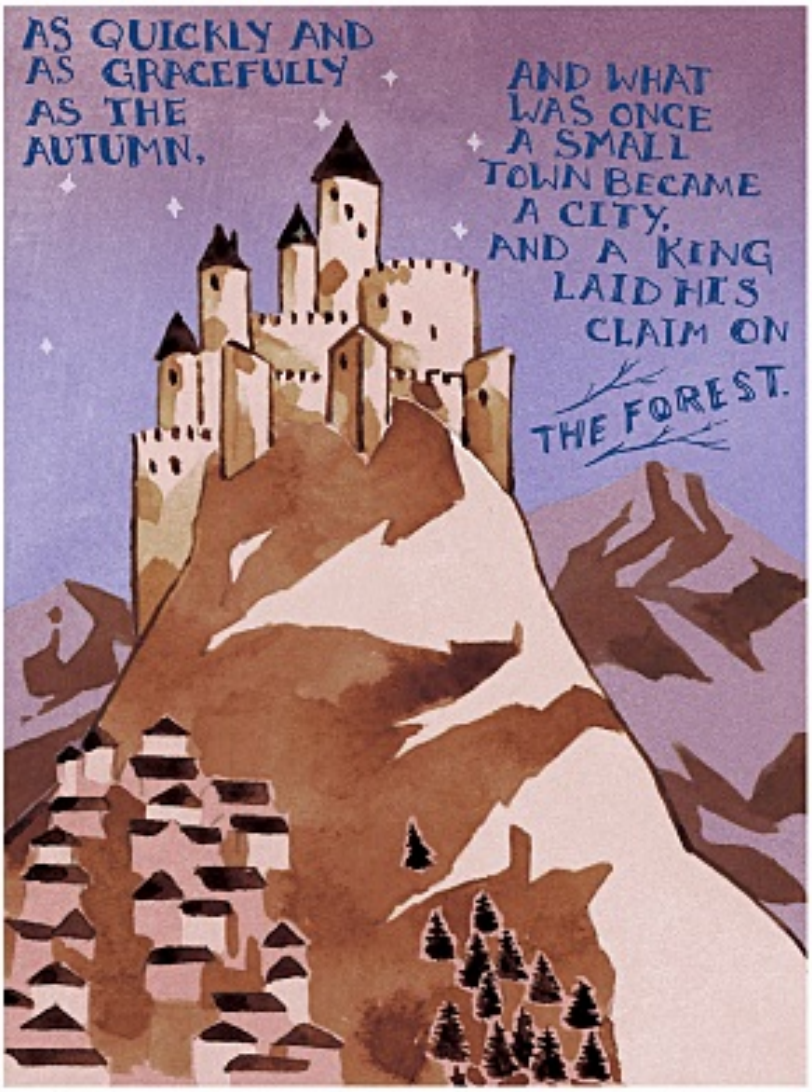
I tried to think how Jim Henson would have approached a story about a witch. Jim's work is such a huge influence on me, I really wanted to try to live up to the bar he set. When I was designing the characters I tried to imagine how the studio would approach making the Lord of the Forest. I wanted to design something scary but elegant, something in the vein of Jareth from *Labyrinth*. For the witch, I wanted to put my own spin on the trope of the banished witch who lives deep in the forest. I wasn't satisfied by the witch stories I was finding, and decided if I took two mythical creatures and put them together, I could completely change the Witch's role and use that to defy reader expectations of what a witch should be.

– S. M. Vidaurri


LONG AGO
WHEN THE
SPARROWS STILL FLEW
AS THICK AS THE NIGHT,
IN A LAND SO
remote
THE KING HAD YET
TO CLAIM IT,
there lived
a young
woman.

ONE NIGHT, WHEN THE DAWN WAS RESTING ON THE HORIZON,
A HUNTER AT THE END OF HIS TREK
SAW THE YOUNG WOMAN CONJURE A SPELL.
BY ROCK, ARROW, AND SPEAR
THE YOUNG WOMAN WAS FORCED FROM THE TOWN
AND INTO THE VERY CENTER OF THE FOREST
WHICH HAD ENTRANCED HER.
THE WITCH
AS THEY CALLED HER
WAS NEVER HEARD FROM AGAIN.

THE YEARS FELL



A great castle was constructed in which the young KING, the QUEEN, and their daughter, the PRINCESS, lived.

Soon the King and Queen celebrated the birth of a young prince, their heir.

On the day of his son's birth, the king set out to cut down the tallest tree in the forest

and fashion from it a great crown to pass on when his son eventually inherited the throne

FOR THE TALLEST BRANCHES OF THE TALLEST TREE

THEY WERE SAID TO BE SO TALL THAT THEY CAUGHT THE STARS IN THEIR NETTLES AND CONTAINED MAGICAL POWERS

HOWEVER, THE GREAT TREE WAS BELOVED BY

THE LORD OF THE FOREST

SO FEW VENTURED INTO THE FOREST THAT FEW, IF ANY, EVER SAW THE LORD
AND HE HAD BEGUN TO LIVE ONLY IN MYTHS.
SINCE THAT TIME, THE FOREST HAD GROWN DARK
THE PEOPLE WERE MORE SCARED OF IT THAN EVER. THEY DID NOT TRUST HOW THE SWAYING BRANCHES PLAYED TRICKS ON THEIR EYES.
HOW THE WIND CARRIED THEIR SONGS UNTIL THEY FELT
EMPTY.
AND MORE AND MORE THE TOWNSFOLK BEGAN TO WONDER IF THAT SAD, BEAUTIFUL, LONELY VOICE WAS EVEN
THE WEND AT A

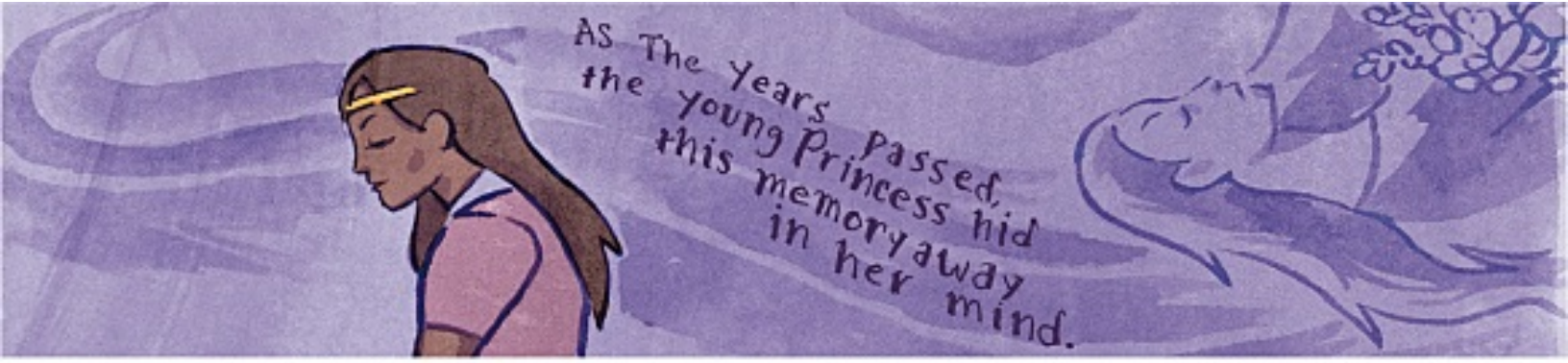
THE PRINCESS,

however, loved the forest, and spent all of her time climbing its boughs and ruining her skirts in its mud.

The STUFFY HALLS OF THE KINGDOM PALED IN COMPARISON TO THE GREAT EXPANSE OF THE FOREST

Of all the places in the forest, The Princess loved most to climb atop the stump of The Great Tree
She could see so much from there. One day as she watched the sparrows return to roost, she was startled by the sound of a voice approaching.
She hid in the hollow of the great tree.
Foul!
Cursed!
Villainy!
Someone has cut down the great tree!
Curse them!
Repeated the thistles and nettles
AND I SHALL!
replied a voice
I PUT A CURSE ON ANY MAN WHO WEARS THE CROWN MADE FROM THE JEWEL OF THE FOREST!

THE PRINCESS, DESPERATE TO KNOW THE OWNER OF THE VOICE, FOLLOWED IT UNTIL SHE CAME ACROSS A BABBLING BROOK.
RESTING IN THE SHALLOWS WAS THE WITCH.
FRIGHTENED, THE PRINCESS FLED.

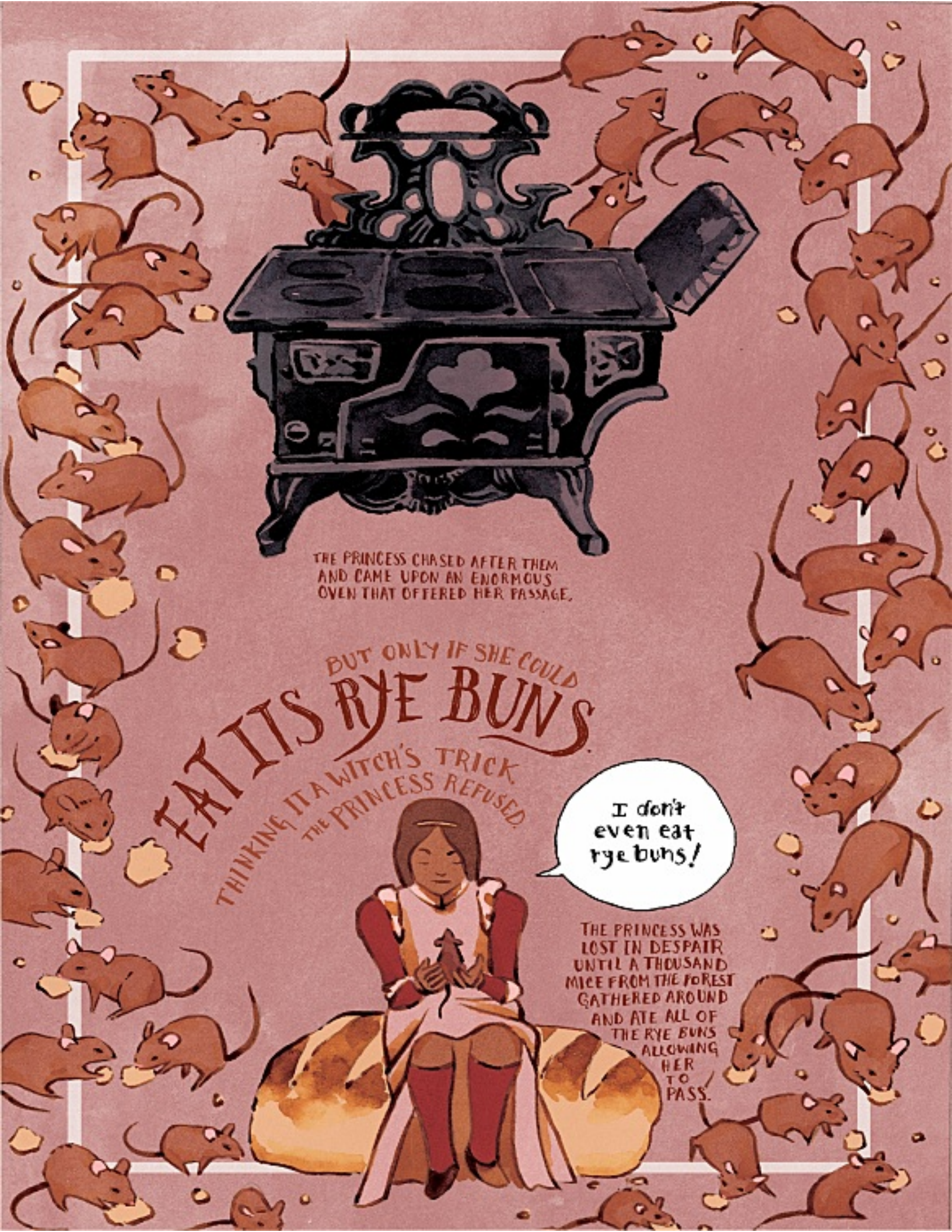

As the years passed, the young Princess hid this memory away in her mind.

Soon, the Prince's name day approached, on which he would be eligible to take up his place in court.
On the eve of the celebration the King and Queen died, poisoned by a magical apple.
And so a sadness fell upon the kingdom.

THE THRONE, BY RIGHTS, WOULD GO TO THE PRINCE.
AND SO A CORONATION WAS SET UP IN ORDER TO CROWN THE YOUNG PRINCE.
THE PRINCESS TRIED TO CONVINCE THE TOWNSPEOPLE THAT THE WITCH HAD KILLED HER PARENTS, BUT THEY WOULD NOT LISTEN.

FEARING FOR HER BROTHER'S LIFE, THE YOUNG PRINCESS WATCHED OVER HIM.
IN THE EARLY LIGHT OF THE DAWN, SHE PRAYED IN FRONT OF THE MOON FOR HER BROTHER'S SAFETY.

THE PRINCESS TRIED TO STAY AWAKE, BUT AS SLEEP OVERTOOK HER, A GIGANTIC
SWAN GOOSE
CAME UPON THEM AND SNATCHED THE YOUNG PRINCE~
-and his magical crown- away.


THE PRINCESS CHASED AFTER THEM AND CAME UPON AN ENORMOUS OVEN THAT OFFERED HER PASSAGE.
BUT ONLY IF SHE COULD
EAT HIS RYE BUNS.
THINKING IT A WITCH'S TRICK, THE PRINCESS REFUSED.
I don't even eat rye buns!
THE PRINCESS WAS LOST IN DESPAIR UNTIL A THOUSAND MICE FROM THE FOREST GATHERED AROUND AND ATE ALL OF THE RYE BUNS ALLOWING HER TO PASS.

NEXT A RIVER OF MILK STOOD BEFORE THE PRINCESS AND OFFERED HER THE PRINCE IF SHE COULD ONLY DRINK ITS CONTENTS. THE PRINCESS WATCHED AS A FLOCK OF PELICANS CAME AND DRAINED THE RIVER.

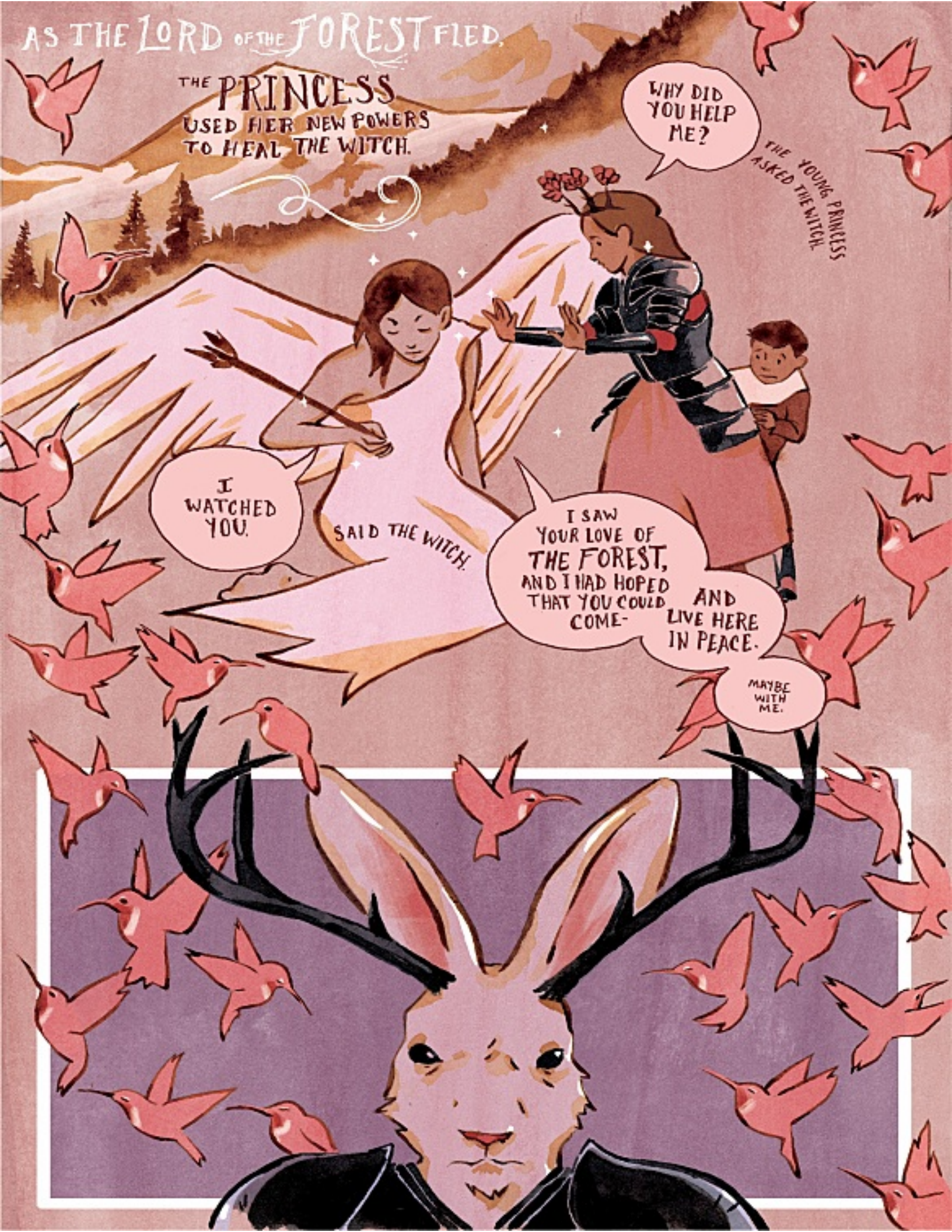
UNDER A SPINNING WHEEL.
THE SIZE OF A HOUSE, THAT
TOLD THE PRINCESS THAT
IF SHE COULD SPIN GOLD
THEN, AND ONLY THEN
COULD SHE PASS.
BUT SUDDENLY
A SWARM OF
MAGNIFICENT
GOLDEN MOTHS
FLEW THROUGH THE
NIGHT AND
ILLUMINATED
THE THREAD,
ALLOWING
HER TO PASS.

FINALLY, THE PRINCESS CAME UPON THE LORD OF THE FOREST
WHO HAD SHOT THE WITCH WITH AN ENCHANTED ARROW.
HE HANDED THE PRINCESS THE YOUNG PRINCE, AND INSISTED THE YOUNG BOY BE CROWNED KING THEN AND THERE.
PRINCESS, I KNOW YOU WELL, YOU HAVE A GREAT RESPECT FOR MY FOREST.
AND SO I HAVE SHOT DOWN THIS WITCH WHO WOULD STEAL YOUR BROTHER.
LET THE YOUNG KING WEAR PROUDLY MY JEWEL OF THE FOREST.

AS THE LORD OF THE FOREST BEGAN TO CROWN THE PRINCE
THE PRINCESS FELT SOMETHING WRONG.
A MEMORY HIDDEN DEEP CAME TO THE SURFACE.
The Princess dashed forward, and before the LORD OF THE FOREST could stop her, She threw her head under the crown.
NO!

THE PRINCESS, WEARING THE MAGICAL CROWN GAINED ALL THE POWERS OF THE GREAT TREE AND THE SKY IT HAD ONCE RISEN ABOVE.
SHE FELT A GREAT connection TO THE THING SHE HAD SAT UPON FOR SO LONG. WHOSE GREAT TRUNK SHE HAD TOUCHED, TO WHOM SHE HAD WHISPERED HER SECRETS.
AND SHE REALIZED THAT NO ONE WHO WOULD CUT DOWN SUCH A BEAUTIFUL THING, COULD EVER UNDERSTAND THE POWER THAT IT HELD.

The Princess turned to the LORD,
YOU WERE THE VOICE I HEARD IN THE WOODS THAT DAY.
I HAD WONDERED IF IT HAD EVEN HAPPENED AT ALL—
BUT I HEARD YOU CALL THE TREE YOUR 'JEWEL' ONCE BEFORE
AND I REMEMBERED!
The LORD OF THE FOREST cowered in FEAR, the PRINCESS wore the crown freely. A curse meant for a KING would not affect her.
GO NOW! INTO YOUR GREAT FOREST, WHICH I HAVE ALWAYS LOVED. I UNDERSTAND NOW THAT WHAT MY FATHER DID TO YOUR TREE WAS WRONG, SO I WILL NOT SEEK REVENGE.
YOU, OF ALL THE CREATURES IN THE FOREST, SHOULD KNOW THAT PLANTING A TREE,
INSTEAD OF CUTTING ONE DOWN, IS BEST.
SO NOW I WILL PLANT HARMONY IN THE HOPE THAT YOU SHALL SOW IT WITH ME.


AS THE LORD OF THE FOREST FLED,
THE PRINCESS USED HER NEW POWERS TO HEAL THE WITCH.
WHY DID YOU HELP ME?
THE YOUNG PRINCESS ASKED THE WITCH.
I WATCHED YOU.
SAID THE WITCH.
I SAW YOUR LOVE OF THE FOREST, AND I HAD HOPED THAT YOU COULD COME-
AND LIVE HERE IN PEACE.
MAYBE WITH ME.

I CANNOT LIVE IN THE FOREST.
LAMENTED THE PRINCESS.
THE CURSE THAT WOULD KILL A KING ALSO BINDS ME TO THE THRONE.
ALTHOUGH WE CAN'T GO BACK TO THE FOREST, PERHAPS TOGETHER WE CAN MAKE IT SO THAT NO MORE CHILDREN WILL HAVE TO BETRAY THEIR FAMILIES—
IN ORDER TO LOVE WHAT WE BOTH FIND SO DEAR.
NOW HEALED, THE WITCH FLEW THE YOUNG PRINCESS AND HER BROTHER HOME.

THE LORD OF THE FOREST'S CURSE RANG TRUE. AND THE KINGDOM WOULD NEVER AGAIN HAVE A KING.
BUT THE PRINCESS WAS THE FIRST, AND YOUNGEST, QUEEN EVER TO RULE
WITH THE WITCH WELCOMED BACK INTO THE KINGDOM TO WATCH OVER THEM ALL.
AND ALTHOUGH THE LORD WAS NEVER HEARD FROM AGAIN, THIS TIME HE WAS NOT FORGOTTEN.
ON HARVEST DAY, all the children would adorn themselves with antlers made of BRANCHES and go from house to house asking for a small treat, TO SHOW APPRECIATION.
The End.

TALE TWO COVER

KYLA VANDERKLUGT

the SNOW WITCH

The Snow Witch - or Yuki Onna, literally "Snow Woman" - is a recurring figure in Japanese folklore. She appears in various tales, but the iteration that's become most popular, both in and outside of Japan, was recorded by Lafcadio Hearn (supposedly relayed to him by a farmer) and published in his book *Kwaidan* in 1904. The original pitch for this comic followed Hearn's version fairly closely, but my editor and I agreed that certain changes might help to draw out a more solid theme. And so as I dove into the process of turning the story into a comic, I granted myself quite a bit of artistic license in altering the characters and how their interactions play out.

In Hearn's version, Yuki Onna simply freezes Mosaku to death. Here, she feeds on his life force, as many older versions of Yuki Onna are said to do. The second half of the story sees bigger changes; I omitted Minokichi's mother and nine of the children (nine!) and the one remaining child plays a more pivotal role in the story, triggering the final scene between Minokichi and Oyuki. Minokichi's failing health was another device I added; a similar version of the tale I found had Oyuki fall ill, but I flipped things around.

In the end, although I deviated from Hearn's story, I hope that my version stays true in other ways to the figure of Yuki Onna herself, who has been shifting and changing since well before Hearn told her tale.

– Kyla Vandenklugt

MANY, MANY YEARS AGO, THERE EXISTED A SMALL VILLAGE AT THE FOOT OF A MOUNTAIN.
IN THE VILLAGE LIVED AN OLD WOODCUTTER AND HIS APPRENTICE, AND EVERY DAY THEY CLIMBED THE MOUNTAIN TO GATHER WOOD FROM THE FOREST.
WE SHOULD TURN BACK SOON.
WHAT
IN
CAR

FOR?
THERE'S LIGHT YET
THE DAY, AND I CAN
RY MORE THAN THIS.
LOOK TO THE SKIES, MINOKICHI.
THERE'S FOUL WEATHER ON THE WAY.

OLD MOSAKU'S WORDS PROVED TRUE, AND SOON THE TWO WERE ENGULFED IN A BLIZZARD SO THICK, THEY COULD HARDLY TELL THE GROUND FROM THE SKY.

THEY STUMBLED BLINDLY, UNTIL THROUGH THE HAZE MINOKICHI'S YOUNG EYES SPIED:

A SHELTER!

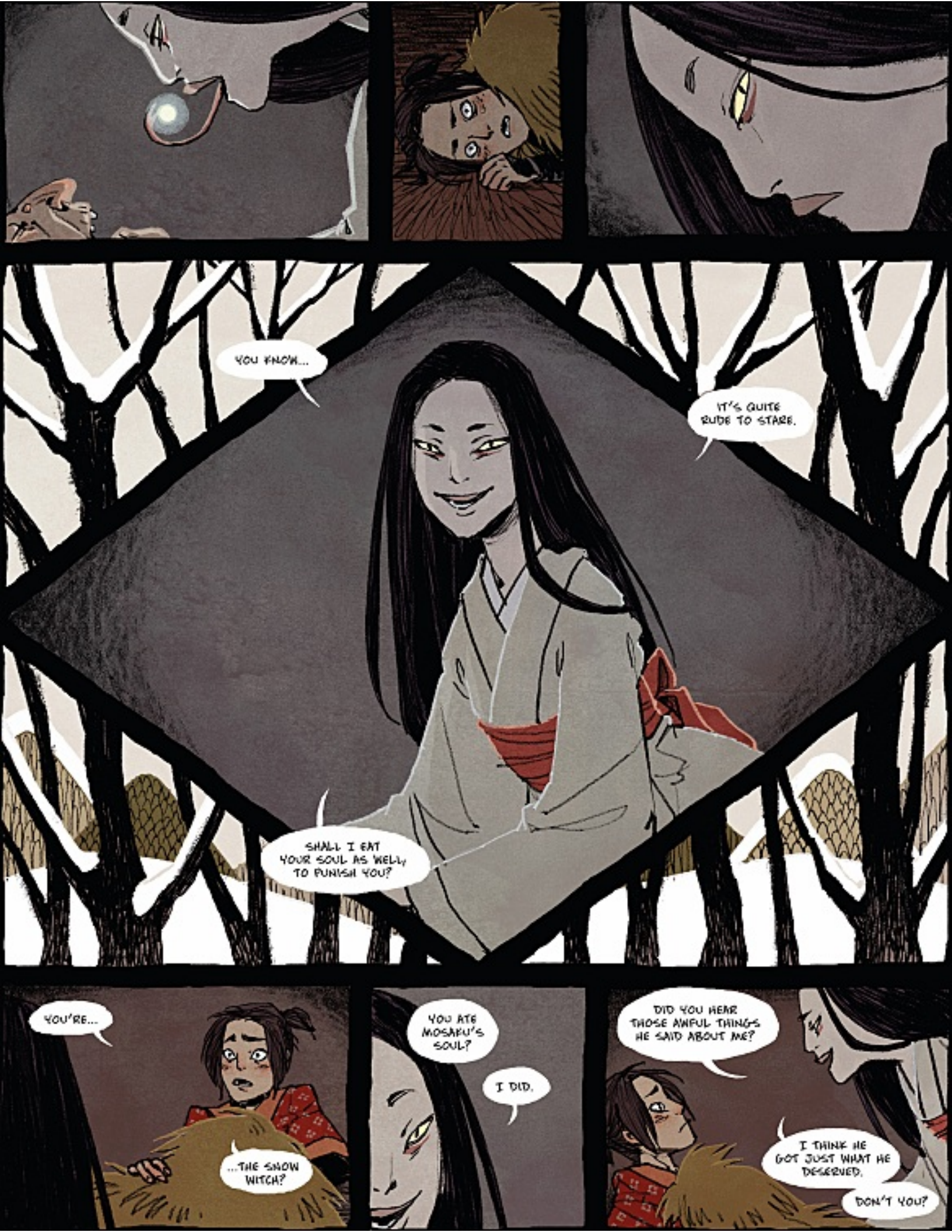
NOT MUCH OF ONE, THOUGH. THE WIND POURS THROUGH AS IF THROUGH A SIEVE.

YOU LOOK LIKE A SNOW DEMON, OLD MAN!

IT'S NOT MEANT FOR WINTER, I SUSPECT, BUT IT MAY SEE US THROUGH THE NIGHT.
WATCH YOUR TONGUE, BOY. THE DEMONS OF THIS MOUNTAIN ARE NO LAUGHING MATTER.
HAVE YOU NOT HEARD THE VILLAGERS TELL OF THE SNOW WITCH?
...THE SNOW WITCH?
AYE, LAD.
A CRUEL CREATURE, AS TERRIBLE AS SHE IS BEAUTIFUL - AND CAPABLE OF NEITHER KINDNESS NOR MERCY.
THEY SAY THOSE WHO SURVIVE A MEETING WITH THE SNOW WITCH ENCOUNTER ONLY HARDSHIP EVER AFTER...

"...BUT FEW SURVIVE."
UNTIL, DEEP IN THE NIGHT...

AND WITH THOSE WORDS HANGING IN THE CHILL AIR BETWEEN THEM, THE TWO FELL ASLEEP.


YOU KNOW...
IT'S QUITE RUDE TO STARE.
SHALL I EAT YOUR SOUL AS WELL, TO PUNISH YOU?
YOU'RE...
...THE SNOW WITCH?
YOU ATE MOSAKU'S SOUL?
I DID.
DID YOU HEAR THOSE AWFUL THINGS HE SAID ABOUT ME?
I THINK HE GOT JUST WHAT HE DESERVED.
DON'T YOU?

BUT IT WAS ONLY OUT OF CONCERN FOR ME THAT MOSAKU SPOKE SO ABOUT YOU!
YOU KNOW...
...YOU ARE VERY YOUNG.
YOUNG E
TO BELIEVE
OF ANY

NOUGH
THE BEST
YONE.
WOULD YOU BELIEVE THIS EVIL WITCH WOULD SPARE YOU, IN RETURN FOR A PROMISE?
ANYONE IS CAPABLE OF KINDNESS...
...I BELIEVE.
YOU HOPE, RATHER.
BUT, YES. I WILL SPARE YOU, ON ONE CONDITION.

PROMISE YOU WILL NEVER SPEAK OF ME TO ANOTHER LIVING SOUL.
IF YOU TELL ANYONE OF THIS MEETING, FOR MY PART, I PROMISE I WILL FIND YOU...
I PROM
...AND PUNISH YOU.

ISE.
AND ON HEARING THOSE WORDS...
...THE SNOW WITCH DISSOLVED INTO THE HOWLING WINTER WINDS.

MINOKICHI RETURNED TO THE VILLAGE ONCE THE STORM PASSED, BRINGING WITH HIM THE BODY OF MOSAKU.
IN TIME, THE STREAM OF QUESTIONS DWINDLED TO A TRICKLE, THEN CEASED; AND MINOKICHI WAS LEFT TO HIS SILENCE.

THE VILLAGERS WERE FULL OF QUESTIONS FOR MINOKICHI, BUT THEIR QUESTIONS WERE MET ONLY WITH SILENCE.

SPRING FOLLOWED WINTER, AND WHEN SUMMER AND AUTUMN HAD PASSED AND WINTER CLOSED ONCE MORE OVER THE VILLAGE, MINOKICHI RETURNED TO THE MOUNTAIN TO GATHER WOOD.
ONE EVENING HE CAME UPON A YOUNG WOMAN AS HE WAS MAKING HIS WAY HOME.

SHE INTRODUCED HERSELF AS OYUKI, AND EXPLAINED THAT SHE WAS TRAVELING TO THE CITY, AND HAD HEARD THERE WAS A VILLAGE NEARBY WHERE SHE MIGHT SPEND THE NIGHT.

IT'S TRUE OUR VILLAGE LIES JUST AHEAD, BUT YOU WON'T FIND ANY INNS THERE.
OF COURSE, IF YOU'VE NOWHERE ELSE TO STAY, YOU'RE WELCOME TO SHARE MY HOUSE.
I SEE...
WOULD THAT NOT BE AN IMPOSITION?
LOOK TO THE SKIES - THERE'S A STORM ON THE WAY. YOU DON'T WANT TO BE OUTSIDE ON A NIGHT LIKE THIS.
I'LL GLADLY ACCEPT YOUR KIND OFFER, THEN.

AND JUST AS MINOKICHI HAD PREDICTED, A STORM SPRUNG UP THAT NIGHT, RATTLING WINDOWS AND DOORS AS THE CHILL WINDS SOUGHT ENTRANCE AND THE SNOW PILED ITSELF AGAINST THE WALLS.

DOES THIS VILLAGE OFTEN SEE STORMS SO STRONG?
I'VE NEVER BEFORE SEEN ONE LIKE THIS...

...EXCEPT HIGH IN THE MOUNTAINS.
I'M AFRAID YOU MAY HAVE TO DELAY YOUR JOURNEY.
THE WARMTH OF YOUR HOSPITALITY MORE THAN MAKES UP FOR ANY DELAY.

THE STORM RAGED FOR DAYS, AND THEIR REGARD FOR EACH OTHER GREW AND GREW, WHILE OYUKI'S DEPARTURE WAS MENTIONED LESS AND LESS.
AND WHEN THE STORM CLEARED, OYUKI NEVER DEPARTED AT ALL, FOR THE TWO HAD FALLEN DEEPLY IN LOVE.
COME SPRING, THE COUPLE WAS WED, AND OYUKI SOON GAVE BIRTH TO A CHILD.
BUT FOLLOWING IN THE WAKE OF THEIR HAPPINESS CAME A CHANGE IN THE VILLAGE.
THE WARM DAYS OF SUMMER BEGAN TO SHORTEN, WHILE THE WINTERS GREW LONGER AND HARSHER, ICY FINGERS CREEPING INTO THE SPRING AND AUTUMN DAYS.
AND WHILE THEIR SON SEEMED TO BLOSSOM IN THE SNOWS AND FROSTS...

...MINOKICHI
BEGAN T

'S HEALTH
TO FAIL.

FATHER...
DO YOU KNOW WHAT THEY SAY IN THE VILLAGE?
THEY SAY THAT HIGH ON THE MOUNTAIN LIVES AN EVIL SNOW WITCH.
THEY SAY SHE'S CURSED OUR VILLAG
FATHER, SO THE SNO
NEVER END.

AND WHAT DO YOU THINK OF THAT STORY?

I THINK WE SHOULD HUNT HER DOWN AND KILL HER!
SHE'S THE ONE MAKING YOU SICK, ISN'T SHE?
I HATE HER.
AND MINOKICHI, SEEING HIS SON'S SPIRIT SO STEEPED IN ANGER, TOOK HIM BY THE HAND AND TOLD HIM ABOUT THAT NIGHT ON THE MOUNTAIN, MANY SEASONS PAST.

ABOUT HOW HE MET THE SNOW WITCH...
...AND ABOUT HOW SHE HAD SHOWN HIM MERCY.

IF SHE HAD NOT GRANTED ME MY LIFE THEN, I WOULD NEVER HAVE BEEN ABLE TO MEET YOUR MOTHER...
...OR YOU.
BUT, STILL...
YOUR
NEEDS
RUN

...NOW YOU'RE DYING.
FATHER HIS REST. ALONG.
THAT WAS A STRANGE TALE YOU TOLD OUR SON.
WILL YOU DESCRIBE HER TO ME, THIS SNOW WITCH YOU MET?

SHE WAS DRESSED ALL IN WHITE...
...WITH WHITE SKIN TO MATCH...
...AND PALE EYES THAT BURNED WITH COLD AND WARMTH ALIKE.
NEXT TO YOU, SHE WAS THE MOST BEAUTIFUL WOMAN I HAD EVER SEEN, AND NOW...
NOW YOU KNOW WHY.

YOU MADE A PROMISE TO ME ON THAT NIGHT, NEVER TO SPEAK OF ME.
WHY DID YOU BREAK THAT PROMISE?
WHY NOW?
YOU...
CAN YOU STI
SAY SUCH THIN
EVEN NOW?
THE
I'VE BR
ARE L
Y
ALL THE SAME
I WOULDN'T CHA
THESE YEARS F
ANYTHING.
I COULDN'T STAND THE THOUGHT OF OUR SON THINKING ILL OF SOMEONE...
...WHO HAD ONCE SHOWN ME KINDNESS.

LL
GS,
SE WINTERS
OUGHT WITH ME
EECHING AWAY
OUR LIFE.
I
NGE
OR
MY LIFE IS A FAIR PRICE FOR THE HAPPINESS I'VE KNOWN WITH YOU.

A HUMAN MAY BE ABLE TO BREAK A PROMISE ONCE GIVEN FOR THE SAKE OF KINDNESS, BUT A SNOW WITCH CAN DO NO SUCH THING.
AND SO SAYING, THE SNOW WITCH LEANED CLOSE AND DELIVERED MINOKICHI'S SENTENCE:
THE COOL HANDS ON MINOKICHI'S SKIN TURNED FIRST TO ICE, THEN TO NOTHING AT ALL...

I PROMISED THAT IF YOU EVER SPOKE OF ME, I WOULD PUNISH YOU - AND PUNISH YOU I SHALL.
"YOU SHALL NEVER SEE ME AGAIN."
...AS THE SNOW WITCH DISSOLVED INTO A FLURRY OF SNOW BEFORE HIS EYES.

AFTER THE DISAPPEARANCE OF THE SNOW WITCH, THE LONG, HARSH WINTERS RELEASED THEIR GRIP ON THE VILLAGE.
SPRING RETURNED, AND WITH IT RETURNED MINOKICHI'S GOOD HEALTH.

AND AS HIS STRENGTH GREW AMONGST THE SHOOTING GREENS AND SHIVERING NEW LEAVES, MINOKICHI DEVOTED HIMSELF TO HIS LAST WHISPERED PROMISE TO THE SNOW WITCH:
TO RAISE THEIR SON TO BE ALWAYS KIND.

TALE THREE COVER
MATTHEW DOW SMITH

the Phantom Isle

There are an endless number of variations on the 'Lost Island' myth, from the lost continent of Mu, to the legendary Atlantis, to the island of Avalon from Arthurian legend, but of all the different versions on that theme, my favorite has always been Ireland's Tîr na nÓg.

In Irish legends, Tîr na nÓg is a magical realm of everlasting youth that was the backdrop for many tales of gods and heroes, the most famous of which is the tale of Oison and Niamh. In it, a human hero (Oison) falls in love with a woman of the Otherworld (Niamh). She brings him to live with her on Tîr na nÓg, but after what seems like a few years, he gets homesick and returns to Ireland on a winged horse only to discover that he's actually been gone 300 years. Stunned, he falls from the horse and is aged instantly, dying in the process.

For my tale, I took the basic shape of the Oison and Niamh legend and mixed it together with some things I wanted to say about myths and stories and the people who tell them. I've always believed that stories had power, and on a magical island like Tîr na nÓg, we could see how great that power could be, while also talking about where stories come from and what it means to be alive.

– *Matthew Dow Smith*

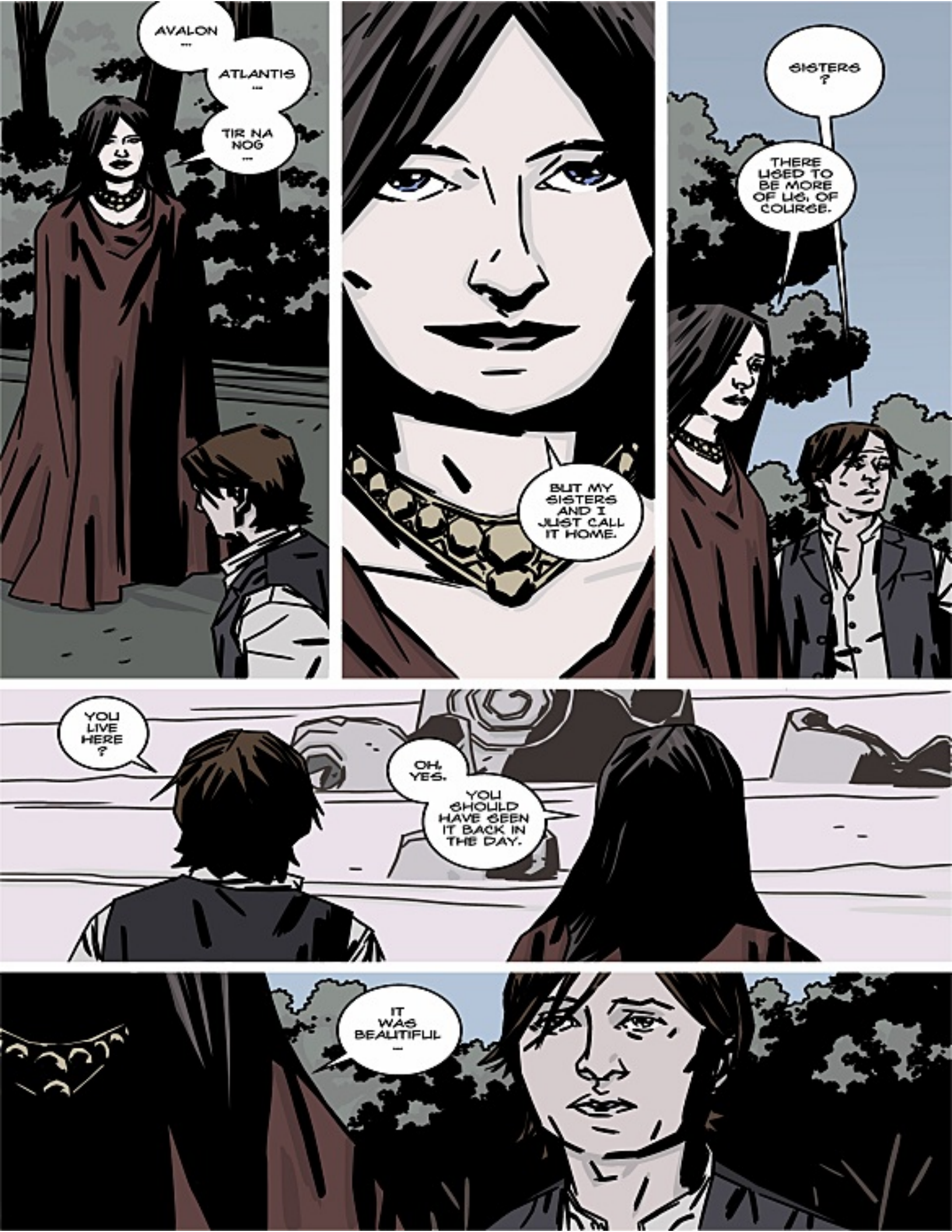
WHAT IS IT ABOUT A NICE FIRE ?
THE CRACKLE OF FLAMES ...
THE SWEET SMELL OF BURNING WOOD ...
THE WARM GLOW FILLING THE ROOM.
SOMETHING ABOUT IT JUST BRINGS OUT THE STORYTELLER IN ALL OF US.
IF YOU SAY SO.
OH, I DO.
I DO.

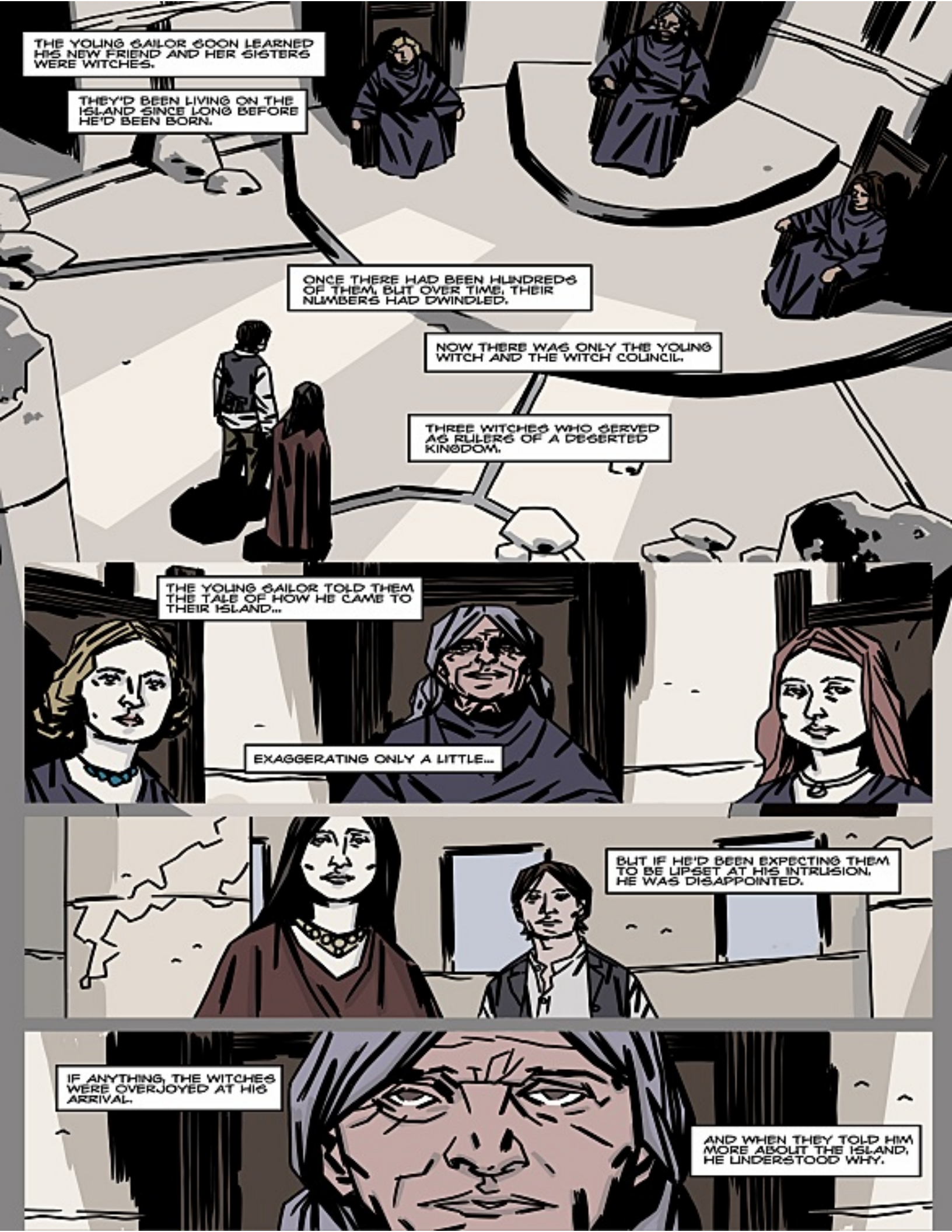
ANY TIME THERE'S MORE THAN ONE PERSON AROUND A FIRE, STORIES ARE NEVER FAR BEHIND.
IT'S JUST IN OUR NATURE.
WE TAKE A SEAT AROUND THE FLAMES AND OUR TONGUES LOOSEN, OUR IMAGINATIONS RELAX, AND THE WORDS "ONCE UPON A TIME" OR "YOU'LL NEVER BELIEVE WHAT HAPPENED" JUST SPILL FROM OUR LIPS.
TALL TALES, FISH STORIES, AN EPIC POEM OR TWO...
YOU'LL HEAR THEM ALL AROUND A ROARING FIRE.
AND SOME OF THEM WILL EVEN BE TRUE.
SO ... LIKE STORIES, DO WE ?

I HAVE A STORY FOR YOU.
IF YOU'D BE AT ALL INTERESTED IN HEARING IT.
A STORY ABOUT STORIES. ACTUALLY.
OR AT LEAST ABOUT A MAN WHO LOVED TO TELL STORIES.
SOMEONE LIKE YOU AND ME.
HE WAS A SAILOR BY PROFESSION, A TELLER OF TALES BY PASSION.
BUT IT WAS A PASSION THAT SERVED HIM WELL ON THE LONG NIGHTS AT SEA.
EVERY NIGHT, HIS FELLOWS WOULD SET HIM DOWN ON A BARREL AND LISTEN TO HIS STORIES UNTIL THE WEE HOURS...
PASSING THE TIME UNTIL THE SUN CAME UP AGAIN.
WHICH IS HOW HE CAME TO BE ON DECK THE NIGHT THEY STRUCK A REEF OFF THE COAST OF CORK.
AND WENT DOWN.

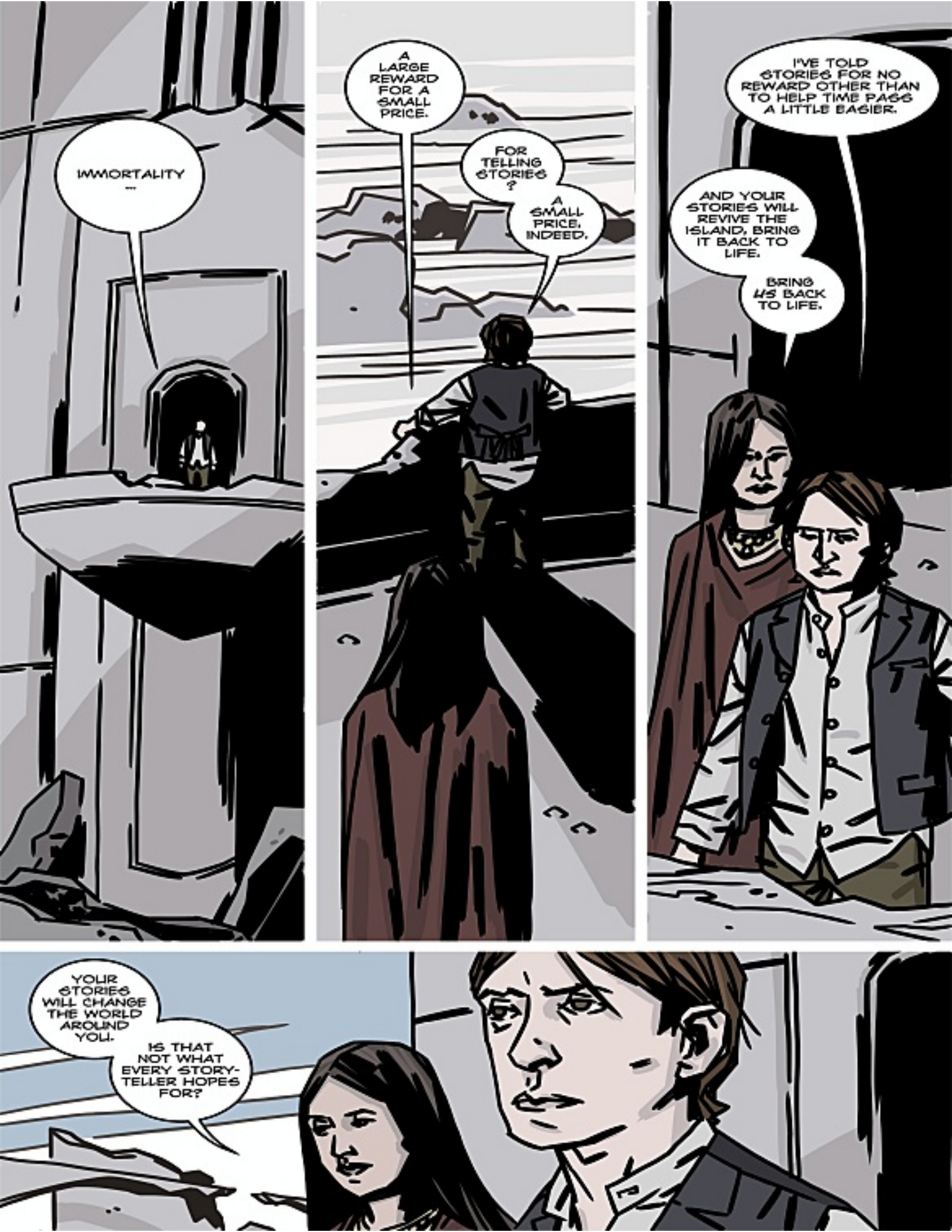
WHEN HE HIT THE ICY WATERS, OUR YOUNG FRIEND THOUGHT HIS STORY WAS OVER, BUT THAT'S NOT HOW THE TALE WAS MEANT TO END.
INSTEAD OF WAKING UP AT THE PEARLY GATES, HE FOUND HIMSELF ON A BEACH, WASHED UP LIKE SO MUCH DRIFTWOOD.
A BEACH ON AN ISLAND WHERE NO ISLAND SHOULD BE.
IT WAS A MYSTERY, BUT BETTER THAT THAN TO FACE SAINT PETER.
HEAVEN TAKES A DIM VIEW OF STRETCHING THE TRUTH.
AND THE GREAT STORYTELLERS HAVE ONLY A PASSING RELATIONSHIP WITH HONESTY.
EVERYONE KNOWS THAT A WELL-PLACED EXAGGERATION CAN ADD SEASONING TO THE DULLEST OF EVENTS...
AND A TRUE STORYTELLER KNOWS THAT *EVERY* TALE BENEFITS FROM A TOUCH OF SPICE.
ESPECIALLY THE TRUE ONES.
NO MATTER HOW EXTRAORDINARY THE TRUTH MIGHT BE.

AND SO IT IS A GREAT IRONY THAT SUCH A FINE STORYTELLER...
WITH HIS QUICKNESS TO EXAGGERATE AND EMBELLISH...
SHOULD FIND HIMSELF IN THE ONE PLACE ON ALL THE EARTH THAT TRULY NEEDED NEITHER TO DESCRIBE IT.
WHAT *IS* THIS PLACE?
THE ISLAND HAS BEEN KNOWN BY MANY NAMES OVER MANY YEARS...


AVALON ...
ATLANTIS ...
TIR NA NOG ...
BUT MY SISTERS AND I JUST CALL IT HOME.
SISTERS ?
THERE USED TO BE MORE OF US, OF COURSE.
YOU LIVE HERE ?
OH. YES.
YOU SHOULD HAVE SEEN IT BACK IN THE DAY.
IT WAS BEAUTIFUL —


THE YOUNG SAILOR SOON LEARNED HIS NEW FRIEND AND HER SISTERS WERE WITCHES.
THEY'D BEEN LIVING ON THE ISLAND SINCE LONG BEFORE HE'D BEEN BORN.
ONCE THERE HAD BEEN HUNDREDS OF THEM, BUT OVER TIME, THEIR NUMBERS HAD DWINDLED.
NOW THERE WAS ONLY THE YOUNG WITCH AND THE WITCH COUNCIL.
THREE WITCHES WHO SERVED AS RULERS OF A DESERTED KINGDOM.
THE YOUNG SAILOR TOLD THEM THE TALE OF HOW HE CAME TO THEIR ISLAND...
EXAGGERATING ONLY A LITTLE...
BUT IF HE'D BEEN EXPECTING THEM TO BE UPSET AT HIS INTRUSION, HE WAS DISAPPOINTED.
IF ANYTHING, THE WITCHES WERE OVERJOYED AT HIS ARRIVAL.
AND WHEN THEY TOLD HIM MORE ABOUT THE ISLAND, HE UNDERSTOOD WHY.

THE HEAD OF THE COUNCIL TOLD HIM OF THE ISLAND AS IT HAD BEEN IN THE OLDEN DAYS...
THE GLORIOUS SPIRES, THE BUSTLING STREETS, THE MANY WITCHES WHO CAME TO THE ISLAND SEEKING REFUGE FROM THE DARKNESS OF THE WORLD.
FOR HUNDREDS OF YEARS, THE ISLAND PROSPERED. BUT OVER TIME, THE WITCHES GREW TIRED, AND THEIR POWERS GREW WEAKER.
THE ISLAND NEEDED IMAGINATION TO EXIST, AND THEIRS HAD GROWN SLOW FROM TOO MANY CENTURIES OF LEISURE.
THE ISLAND WAS HUNGRY FOR NEW DREAMS, NEW STORIES, AND THE WITCHES WOULD REWARD THE ONE WHO PROVIDED THESE STORIES WITH THE MOST PRICELESS OF GIFTS...


IMMORTALITY ...
A LARGE REWARD FOR A SMALL PRICE.
FOR TELLING STORIES?
A SMALL PRICE, INDEED.
I'VE TOLD STORIES FOR NO REWARD OTHER THAN TO HELP TIME PASS A LITTLE EASIER.
AND YOUR STORIES WILL REVIVE THE ISLAND, BRING IT BACK TO LIFE.
BRING US BACK TO LIFE.
YOUR STORIES WILL CHANGE THE WORLD AROUND YOU.
IS THAT NOT WHAT EVERY STORY-TELLER HOPES FOR?

AND THAT'S WHAT THE SAILOR DID.
STORY BY STORY.
STONE BY STONE.
HE CHANGED THE WORLD AROUND HIM.
THE TALE OF FINN'S MIDNIGHT RIDE WITH THE FAIRY KING?
THE FOUNDATION FOR A SPIRED CONFECTION THAT COULD ONE DAY REACH THE SUN ITSELF.
THE STORY OF A SAILOR'S MATE WHO FELL IN LOVE WITH A SELKIE AND GAVE UP HIS HUMANITY FOR A SET OF FINS ONLY TO FIND SHE'D GIVEN UP HER FINS FOR A FINE PAIR OF HUMAN LEGS?
AN AVENUE OF INTRICATE CONCENTRIC STONES NEARLY TOO BEAUTIFUL TO WALK ON.
IF THE CITY NEEDED IMAGINATION, THERE WAS NO FINER CHOICE THAN THE YOUNG SAILOR.

AND THE CITY RETURNED, EVEN GRANDER THAN BEFORE.
THE WITCHES WERE DELIGHTED, HARDLY BELIEVING THEIR LUCK.
AND THE SAILOR?
WELL...

OUR FRIEND WAS BEGINNING TO LEARN THAT HE'D TAKEN ON FAR MORE THAN SIMPLY RETURNING THE ISLAND TO ITS FORMER GLORY.
IF THE CITY'S BREAD AND BUTTER WAS IMAGINATION, HE WOULD HAVE TO KEEP ITS BELLY FULL.
AND HE DID HIS BEST.
SOON THE ISLAND WAS WELCOMING BACK MORE THAN JUST ITS BEAUTY.
THE WITCHES WERE RETURNING TO THE CITY, AND WITH THEM, THEY BROUGHT MORE DEMANDS FOR THE SAILOR'S BAG OF DREAMS AND TALL TALES.
EVEN HE, WHO HAD ONCE TOLD A NEW TALE EVERY NIGHT OF THE CROSSING FROM PLYMOUTH TO ITS NAMESAKE IN THE NEW WORLD, WAS BEGINNING TO RUN OUT OF STORIES.
TIME AND AGAIN, HE'D BEEN FORCED TO DIP INTO THE WELL OF PURE IMAGINATION...

AND THE WELL WAS BEGINNING TO RUN DRY.
LIKE THE CITY, STORIES REQUIRE A SUSTENANCE OF THEIR OWN.
FUEL FOR CREATION.
AND HE'D BEEN DEPRIVED OF THAT FUEL FOR FAR TOO LONG.
SOMETHING IS TROUBLING YOU, STORY-TELLER.
I NEED TO LEAVE THIS PLACE ...
EXPERIENCE LIFE AGAIN ...
FIND NEW STORIES TO TELL.
BUT I DON'T KNOW HOW.
THERE *IS* A WAY, OF COURSE ...
JUST TELL A STORY.
AND HE DID.

WHICH, WITH A LITTLE HELP FROM HIS FRIEND, IS HOW HE CAME TO BE STANDING ON A BEACH NEXT TO A WINGED HORSE.
LIKE THE WITCHES' CITY, IT HAD BEEN CREATED FROM THE FORCE OF HIS IMAGINATION, THE VERY THING HE NEEDED TO REPLENISH.
WHAT DO YOU THINK ?
SHE'S BEAUTIFUL.
SHE'LL GET YOU BACK TO THE MAINLAND, BUT DON'T FORGET ...
YOU'RE PART OF THE ISLAND NOW ...
IF YOU SET FOOT ON THE GROUND BACK HOME, YOU'LL FORFEIT THE GIFT WE'VE GIVEN YOU.
DON'T WORRY ...
I HAVEN'T BEEN HERE FOR LONG —
"BUT I'LL BE BACK IN THE BLINK OF AN EYE."

DID THE SAILOR KNOW HE WOULDN'T BE COMING BACK EVER AGAIN?
DEEP DOWN, I THINK HE DID.
LIVING FOREVER SOUNDS WONDERFUL, BUT AN END-LESS LIFE OF ISOLATION WILL NEVER MEASURE UP TO A LIFE OF EVENTS WORTH BEING TOLD AGAIN.
STORIES COME FROM LIFE.
FROM LIVING.
AND THE SAILOR NEEDED TO LIVE AGAIN.

BUT WHEN THE SAILOR RETURNED TO THE VILLAGE HE CALLED HOME...
HE DISCOVERED HE'D LIVED FAR MORE LIFE THAN HE'D EVER IMAGINED.
SIX MONTHS ON THE ISLAND HAD BEEN HUNDREDS OF YEARS BACK HOME.
HIS FAMILY WAS GONE, HIS HOME WAS A CRUMBLED RUIN. HIS FRIENDS WERE LONG DEAD.
EVERYTHING HE'D KNOWN HAD DISAPPEARED IN THE TIME HE'D BEEN AWAY.
HE HAD NO LIFE TO RETURN TO.
AND IN THAT MOMENT, HE WAS TRULY LOST.
ONE TOUCH OF HIS FOOT ON THE SOIL OF HIS HOME...
AND HE WOULD LOSE HIS IMMORTALITY, AS WELL.
ALL THE YEARS HE'D BEEN AWAY WOULD RETURN TO HIS BODY.

ALL THAT REMAINED FOR HIM WAS ONE FINAL STORY.
ONE LAST TALE.
THE STORY OF WHO HE WAS AND WHERE HE'D BEEN.
THE WITCHES, THE ISLAND, THE MAGICAL WINGED HORSE...
IT WOULD BE THE GRANDEST STORY HE EVER TOLD.
ALL HE NEEDED WAS ONE LAST AUDIENCE.
AND WANDERING THE STREETS OF HIS VILLAGE...
SALTY BARREL
EACH STEP ADDING DECADES TO HIS BODY...
HE FOUND IT.

AND THAT, MY FRIENDS, IS MY CUE.
TIME'S UP, I'M AFRAID.
LAST CALL, AS IT WERE.
BUT YOU HAVEN'T FINISHED THE STORY.
THAT CAN'T BE THE END.
WHAT HAPPENED NEXT ?
DID HE GO BACK TO THE ISLAND ?
WHAT HAPPENED TO THE SAILOR, YOU ASK?
ONLY *HE* KNOWS.

FRANK !
THAT OLD BLOKE ...
WHO WAS HE?
OLD BLOKE ?
WHAT OLD BLOKE ?
THERE WAS A YOUNG FELLA' CAME IN A BIT AGO.
HE'S SITTING RIGHT OVER THERE ...
HUH ...
NOW THAT'S A BIT ODD.

"NEVER SAW HIM LEAVE."
I HOPE YOU'RE NOT HERE TO TAKE ME BACK.
TOO LATE FOR THAT, I THINK.
I TOLD YOU NOT TO TOUCH THE GROUND.

THERE'S NOTHING I CAN DO FOR YOU NOW.
I TOLD MY STORY.
THEN HE DIED.
RIGHT THERE ON THE HILLS OVERLOOKING THE TOWN WHERE HE'D BEEN BORN.
THE YOUNG WITCH GATHERED THE SAILOR'S REMAINS AND CARRIED HIM BACK TO THE ISLAND.
AND WHILE HE WAS GONE, HIS STORIES WOULD LIVE ON.

SOME PEOPLE THINK STORIES COME FROM THIN AIR, OLD FRIEND ...
BUT EVEN THE MOST FANTASTIC STORY COMES FROM LIVING.
ALL IT TAKES IS SOMEONE TO LIVE THAT LIFE ...
AND SOMEONE WHO WANTS TO HEAR ABOUT IT.
NOT TO MENTION A NICE FIRE FOR THEM TO SIT AROUND.

TALE FOUR COVER
JEFF STOKELY
WITH COLORS BY JOHN RAUCH

Vasilissa the Beautiful

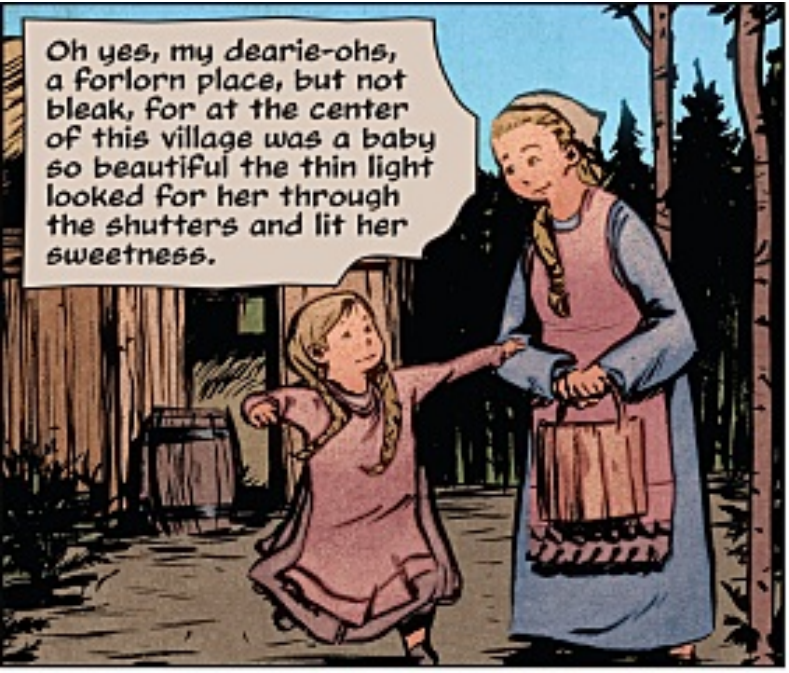
The moment BOOM! & Archaia approached me to adapt an unproduced script from the original Jim Henson's *The Storyteller* show, my eyes lit up because I knew that no matter what the script was, it would be an absolute dream to draw. Dark, creepy, and at its core an important lesson that is never spelled out, never once pandering to the reader, children. When I found out it was a story about Vasilissa the Fair and her trials with the witch Baba Yaga, I was beaming, nearly salivating. What an honor, that my first foray into published writing would be to adapt such an incredible script, and one that was so dear to my own influences.

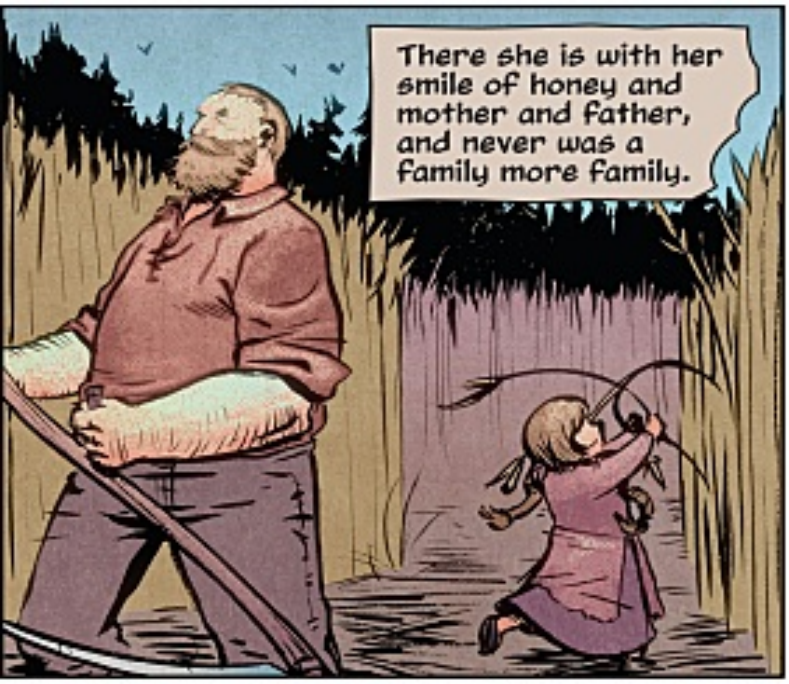
The unfortunate but often times appropriate phrase, *show don't tell*, is one I had to apply to this book with much trepidation. Cutting back on the Storyteller's beautiful narration was tough, as every line is masterful, but if I hadn't, each page would be covered in text. I love a wordy novella as much as the next person, but this gave me a great opportunity to show this luscious and dire setting the way it exists in my mind, and hopefully still harken back to the days of Henson yore. My design for Baba Yaga went through several iterations before I finally decided the bulbous nose and terrifyingly huge eyes were closest to my own inspirations drawn from Henson and Brian Froud. I like to think of her as the amalgamation of such wonderful creatures as Aughra from the *The Dark Crystal,* Gollum from *Lord of the Rings,* and Yubaba from Miyazaki's *Spirited Away.* The wonderful thing is that I'm sure the original Baba Yaga has inspired all of the aforementioned creators in many ways.

I still don't think Archaia understands just how much this opportunity means to me. A chance for me to show everyone how amazing this tale is; through the mist and myth of the black forest, at the edge of the world, in a place which God has forgotten.

– Jeff Stokely

Once upon a time, long winters ago, at the very edge of the world, was a village which God had forgotten.
A few lonely houses stood there, fenced by a forest so deep and so dark that the sky stopped above it for fear of getting lost.
Oh, from time to time fools wandered in, trailing string behind them...
But they never came back.
The people would whisper to each other of a thing which lived inside the forest. A creature which had a name, although no one liked to name it.
A name like the sound of retching, of disgust...
Baba.
Yaga.


Oh yes, my dearie-ohs, a forlorn place, but not bleak, for at the center of this village was a baby so beautiful the thin light looked for her through the shutters and lit her sweetness.


There she is with her smile of honey and mother and father, and never was a family more family.

And this love warmed the village and kindled it. Spreading happiness.
Such a precious thing, all child, all wonder.

The village child...

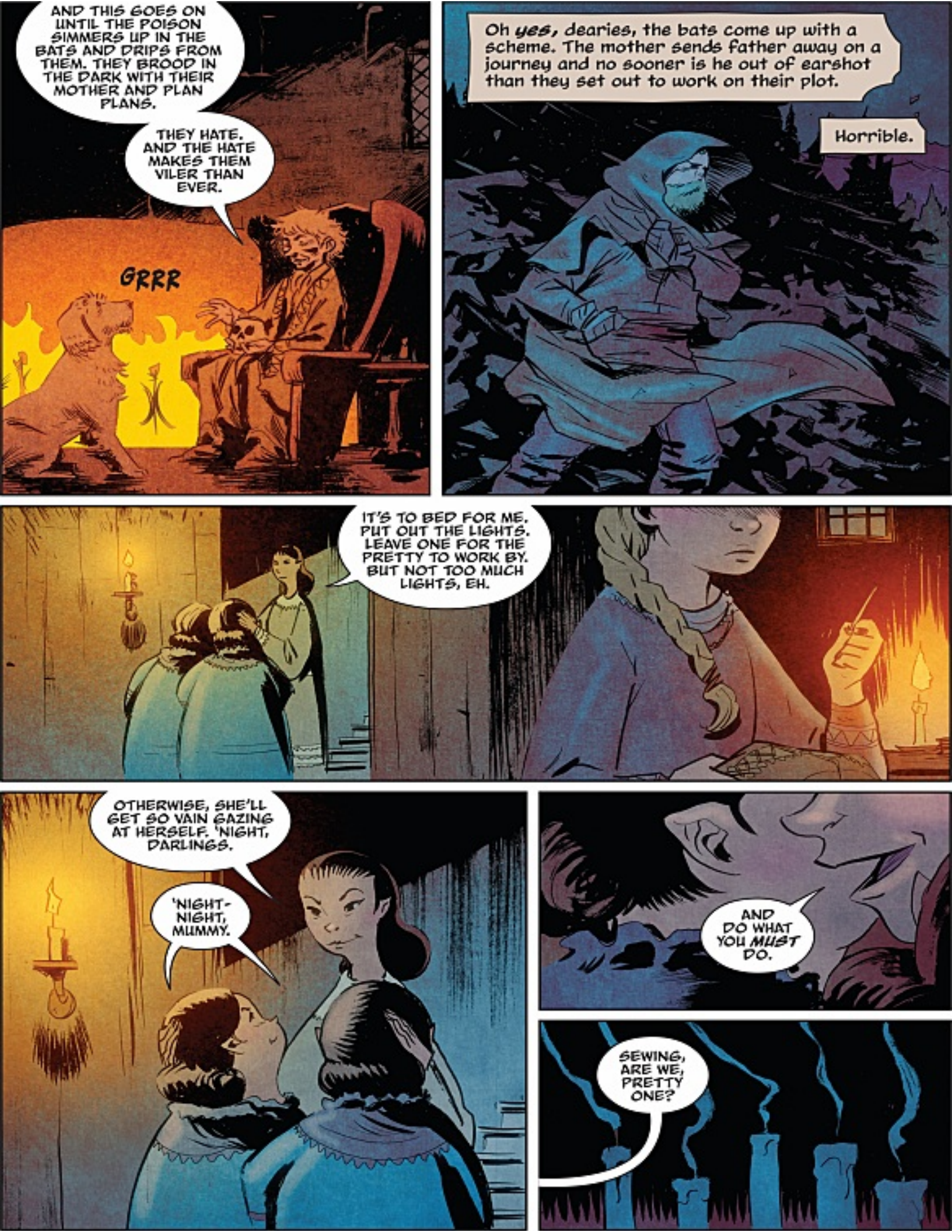
...LITTLE VASILISSA.

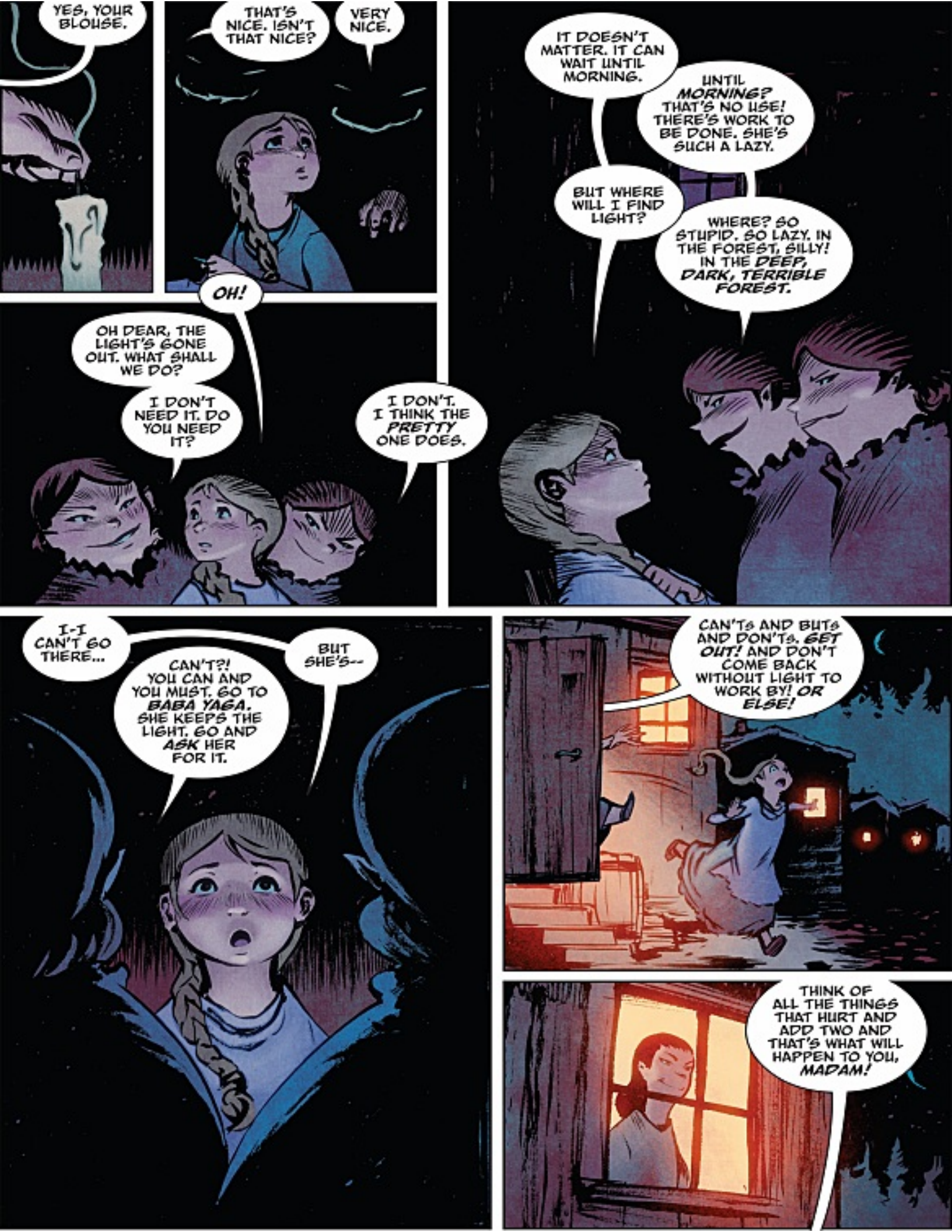
AND SO IT GOES, THIS HARVEST CHILD BLOSSOMING, HAIR THE COLOR OF THE CORN. A CHILD WHO SINGS, UNTROUBLED, SPILLING OVER WITH JOY.
OH, YES. MARVELOUS.
UNTIL ONE DAY INSIDE OF THIS WARM HOME...
...SICKNESS COMES AND LAYS ITS COLD HAND ON THE MOTHER'S FOREHEAD.
The father and child sorrow through the nights-long vigil.
For this is a place God has forgotten and nothing good may flourish long.

FATHER WILL LOOK AFTER YOU.
YOU LOOK AFTER ME.
ALWAYS. ALWAYS.
THIS IS FOR YOU. KEEP IT CLOSE.
WHENEVER YOU NEED HELP, FEED HER. SHE'LL BE YOUR GUIDE.
BUT I DON'T WANT A DOLL. I WANT--
COME AWAY NOW, LOVE. YOUR MOTHER'S GOT TO REST HERSELF.
NO, NO. IT'S ALL RIGHT. COME CLOSE, BOTH OF YOU, AND SIT BY ME.
THAT'S NICE. IS IT COLD?
I FEEL SO COLD.
MAMA?
"MAMA?"
Sorrowstones, sorrowstones, tears and many a sigh.
Aching heart and weary bones 'til the well runs dry.

Such cruelty makes you wonder, where it comes from.
Vasilissa gazed out and decided cruelty lived there, in that damp and black forest.
The years passed on but she hardly noticed. All drifting by as so many clouds, until one day...
Her father met a widow.
He had done with grieving and he wanted a wife again to warm his back at nights and to mind his daughter.
But what a choice, my dearies!
A bat and her two daughters flapped into Vasilissa's life.
With them the cold walked in, and underneath their honey and treacle and "Darling Vasilissa," our pretty could feel their poison leaking out.

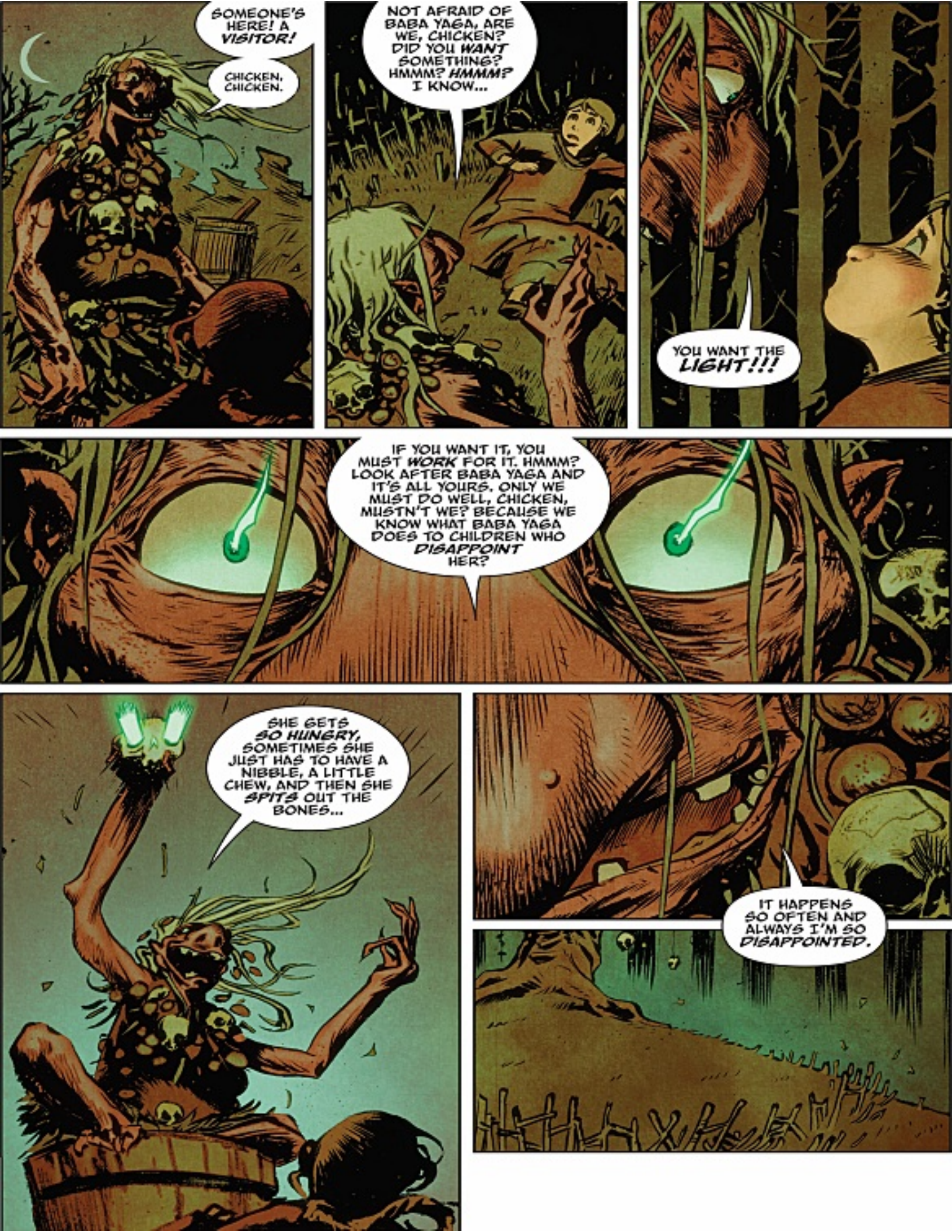
And so they settled into their new roost and fed their fat faces while Vasilissa wore her knuckles white.
Bloated, they filled the tiny house...and oh, what appetites the bats had!
Each scrap they ate fueled their hatred for the beautiful girl.
Oh dearies, never was a poor girl so burdened. She prayed.
WASH MY CLOTHES! COOK MY DINNER!
SWEEP THE YARD! FETCH THE WATER!
IRON THE HOUSE! SWEEP MY FOOD!
COOK MY CLOTHES! FEED ME! FEED ME!
But this was a place which God had forgotten. At the edge of the world.

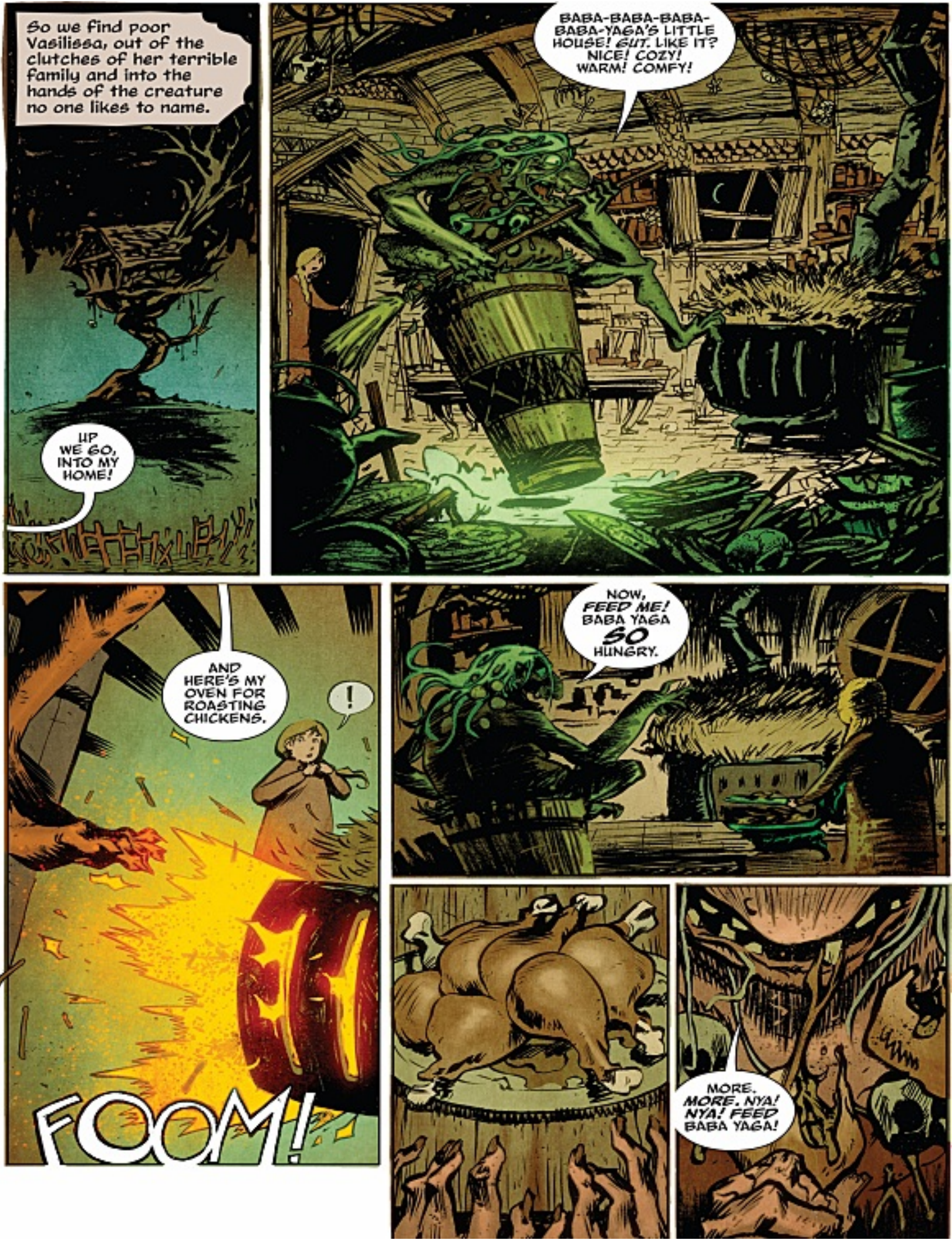

AND THIS GOES ON UNTIL THE POISON SIMMERS UP IN THE BATS AND DRIPS FROM THEM. THEY BROOD IN THE DARK WITH THEIR MOTHER AND PLAN PLANS.
THEY HATE. AND THE HATE MAKES THEM VILER THAN EVER.
GRRR
Oh yes, dearies, the bats come up with a scheme. The mother sends father away on a journey and no sooner is he out of earshot than they set out to work on their plot.
Horrible.
IT'S TO BED FOR ME. PUT OUT THE LIGHTS. LEAVE ONE FOR THE PRETTY TO WORK BY. BUT NOT TOO MUCH LIGHTS, EH.
OTHERWISE, SHE'LL GET SO VAIN GAZING AT HERSELF. 'NIGHT, DARLINGS.
'NIGHT-NIGHT, MUMMY.
AND DO WHAT YOU MUST DO.
SEWING, ARE WE, PRETTY ONE?

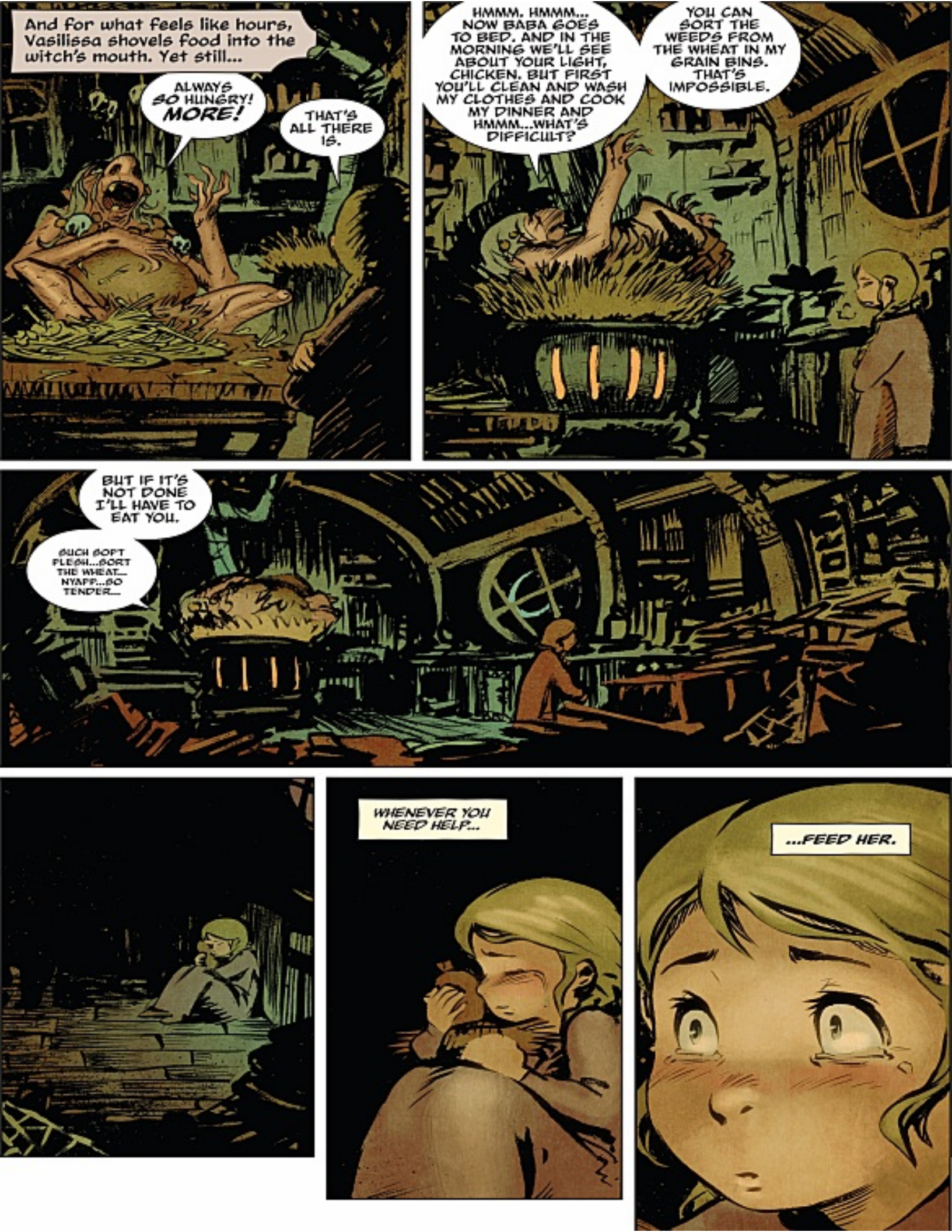

YES, YOUR BLOUSE.
THAT'S NICE. ISN'T THAT NICE?
VERY NICE.
OH!
OH DEAR, THE LIGHT'S GONE OUT. WHAT SHALL WE DO?
I DON'T NEED IT. DO YOU NEED IT?
I DON'T. I THINK THE PRETTY ONE DOES.
IT DOESN'T MATTER. IT CAN WAIT UNTIL MORNING.
UNTIL MORNING? THAT'S NO USE! THERE'S WORK TO BE DONE. SHE'S SUCH A LAZY.
BUT WHERE WILL I FIND LIGHT?
WHERE? SO STUPID. SO LAZY. IN THE FOREST, SILLY! IN THE DEEP, DARK, TERRIBLE FOREST.
I-I CAN'T GO THERE...
CAN'T?! YOU CAN AND YOU MUST. GO TO BABA YAGA. SHE KEEPS THE LIGHT. GO AND ASK HER FOR IT.
BUT SHE'S--
CAN'TS AND BUTS AND DON'TS. GET OUT! AND DON'T COME BACK WITHOUT LIGHT TO WORK BY! OR ELSE!
THINK OF ALL THE THINGS THAT HURT AND ADD TWO AND THAT'S WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO YOU, MADAM!

Into the forest's black secrets...
Past hope, past courage...
Past everything...
...where fear rules.
KRA
KSSSH
As the trees splinter and sway around Vasilissa...

...the sky cracks open and spits out a witch!
BABA YAGA!
KOOOOM


SOMEONE'S HERE! A VISITOR!
CHICKEN, CHICKEN.
NOT AFRAID OF BABA YAGA, ARE WE, CHICKEN? DID YOU WANT SOMETHING? HMMM? HMMM? I KNOW...
YOU WANT THE LIGHT!!!
IF YOU WANT IT, YOU MUST WORK FOR IT. HMMM? LOOK AFTER BABA YAGA AND IT'S ALL YOURS. ONLY WE MUST DO WELL, CHICKEN, MUSTN'T WE? BECAUSE WE KNOW WHAT BABA YAGA DOES TO CHILDREN WHO DISAPPOINT HER?
SHE GETS SO HUNGRY, SOMETIMES SHE JUST HAS TO HAVE A NIBBLE, A LITTLE CHEW, AND THEN SHE SPITS OUT THE BONES...
IT HAPPENS SO OFTEN AND ALWAYS I'M SO DISAPPOINTED.


So we find poor Vasilissa, out of the clutches of her terrible family and into the hands of the creature no one likes to name.
UP WE GO, INTO MY HOME!
BABA-BABA-BABA-BABA-YAGA'S LITTLE HOUSE! GUT. LIKE IT? NICE! COZY! WARM! COMFY!
AND HERE'S MY OVEN FOR ROASTING CHICKENS.
!
FOOM!
NOW, FEED ME! BABA YAGA SO HUNGRY.
MORE. MORE. NYA! NYA! FEED BABA YAGA!


And for what feels like hours, Vasilissa shovels food into the witch's mouth. Yet still...
ALWAYS SO HUNGRY! MORE!
THAT'S ALL THERE IS.
HMMM. HMMM... NOW BABA GOES TO BED. AND IN THE MORNING WE'LL SEE ABOUT YOUR LIGHT, CHICKEN. BUT FIRST YOU'LL CLEAN AND WASH MY CLOTHES AND COOK MY DINNER AND HMMM...WHAT'S DIFFICULT?
YOU CAN SORT THE WEEDS FROM THE WHEAT IN MY GRAIN BINS. THAT'S IMPOSSIBLE.
BUT IF IT'S NOT DONE I'LL HAVE TO EAT YOU.
SUCH SOFT FLESH...SORT THE WHEAT... NYAFF...SO TENDER...
WHENEVER YOU NEED HELP...
...FEED HER.

LITTLE DOLL--FOOD FOR YOU. EAT AND TELL ME WHAT TO DO.
And so, with the essence of kindness, our pretty settles to sleep, hugged by love, embraced by peace. Such a sleep, so deep, so calm, so cosseted.
IT'S ALL CLEAN--IT'S-- THE WHEAT IS SORTED!
ALL THAT'S LEFT IS THE COOKING.
And so the day passes, blessed, our pretty Vasilissa fills the home with song, for now she has a secret, a comfort. A precious gift from her mother.

But such warmth is fleeting. A sigh washes over and bears a black cloud. For now, she returns.

In she glides and finds delicate Vasilissa, caught up in her silks.
HMMM... TIDY. HMMM... CLEAN. HMMM... SMELLS NICE.

DONE IT! CLEVER, CHICKEN.

VERY CLEVER. SNIFF.
HO, MY SERVANTS! TAKE THE WHEAT! TAKE THE WHEAT AND GRIND IT!

GUT GUT. CLEVER VASILISSA. CLEVER BABA YAGA. NOW FEED ME, CHICKEN. I'M SO HUNGRY!
And so the feeding ritual begins once again.
Grease and gristle and bone and bird.
And still precious Vasilissa obeys. She daren't ask for the light.
HMM. GUT GUT. VERY NICE. BABA SLEEPS NOW. SUCH A GOOD CHICKEN, BUT STILL WORK TO BE DONE TOMORROW. MUCH TO CLEAN, AND ANOTHER TASK FOR YOU.
SOMEONE'S PUT DIRT IN MY POPPY SEEDS. NASTY. CLEAN THEM, PRECIOUS. ONE BY ONE.
THAT'S NOT FAIR. ANOTHER TASK!
NOTHING'S FAIR IN THIS PLACE THAT GOD HAS FORGOTTEN. NOTHING'S KIND.
SAVE FOR THE DOLL, AND THAT NIGHT OUR PRETTY FEEDS IT AGAIN. "LITTLE DOLL, FOOD FOR YOU. EAT AND TELL ME WHAT TO DO." AND SO THE DOLL HELPS VASILISSA SLEEP AND CLEAN AND SMILE ONCE MORE.
AND ONCE MORE BABA YAGA RETURNS TO FIND THE TASK COMPLETE. SUMMONING HER SERVANTS WHO CRUSH THE SEEDS TO PURE OIL. "GUT GUT," SHE MUTTERS.

The thing about Baba Yagas is...
A QUESTION, DARLING. ASK ME ANYTHING, LITTLE CHICKEN, LITTLE CLEVER CLOGS.
...you must never ask them anything. Questions are teeth to bite you with.
I HAVE NONE.
THERE MUST BE! I INSIST YOU ASK ME A QUESTION!
WHAT ABOUT THIS? YOUR DEAR FATHER CALLS FOR YOU, HE AND YOUR LOATHSOME STEPSISTERS SHIVER IN THE DARK AWAITING YOUR RETURN. WEEKS HAVE PASSED BY SINCE YOU LEFT FOR THE LIGHT! NOTHING WILL WARM THEM.
NOTHING.
NOTHING?! WHAT ABOUT YOUR DEAR, DEAD MOTHER?
WANT TO KNOW WHERE SHE IS? HMMM? WANT TO FIND HER?

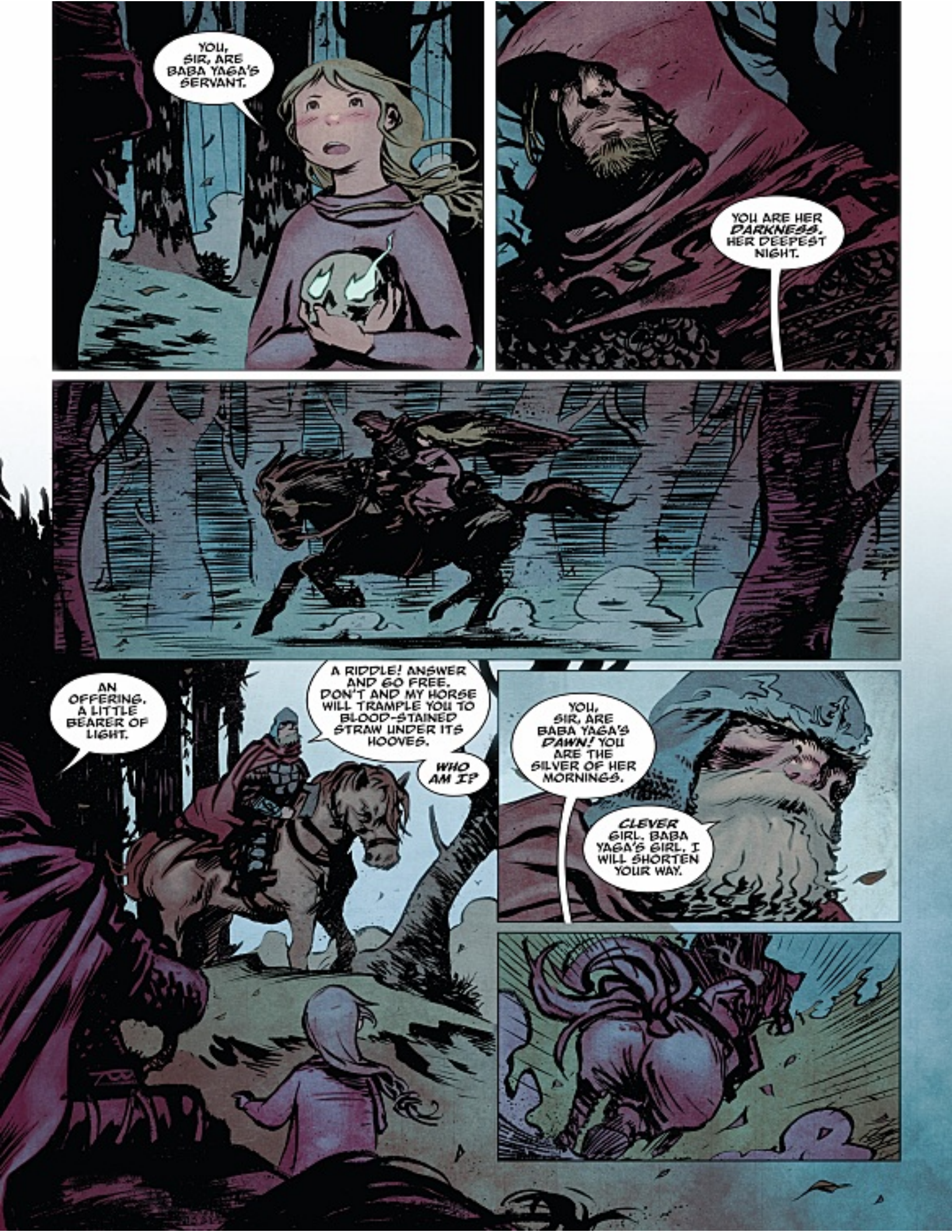
MY MOTHER IS DEAD. AND RESTS IN PEACE.

WHAT A STUPID THING YOU ARE! YOU WILL NEVER KNOW ANYTHING! MORE A FOOL YOU FOR ASKING NOTHING!

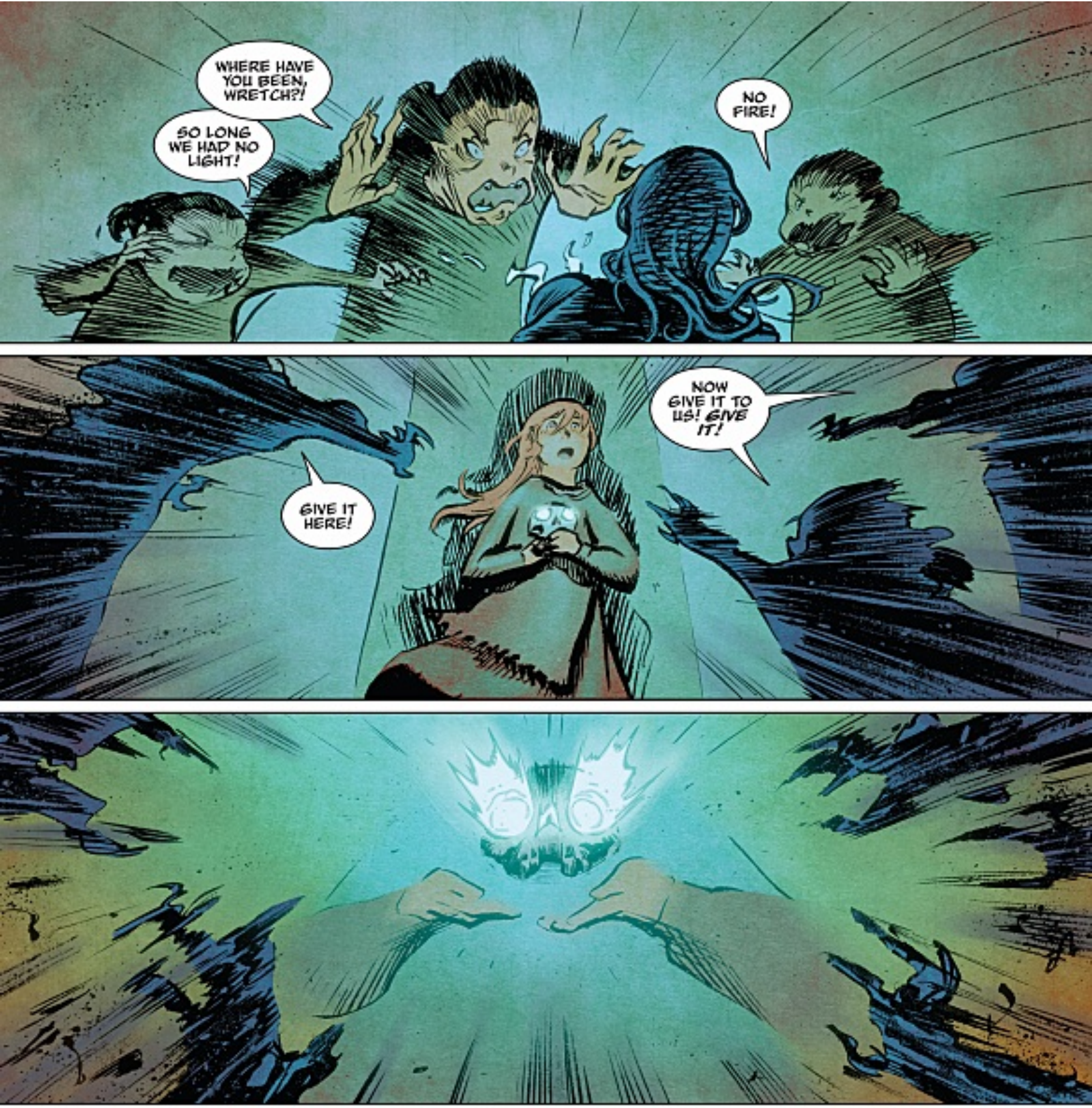
I'M BORED WITH YOU. GET OUT! AND TAKE YOUR BLASTED LIGHT WITH YOU!

BE GONE! AND SEE IF LITTLE CHICKEN CAN SURVIVE THE JOURNEY HOME!
SHOOF

THIEF! THE SKULL!
NO! IT WAS GIVEN TO ME!
A RIDDLE. ANSWER AND GO FREE. BUT ANSWER WRONGLY AND MY HORSE WILL TRAMPLE YOU AND TATTER YOUR SKIN 'TIL IT HANGS LIKE WHITE LEAVES ON THE BONES OF MY TREES.
WHO AM I?

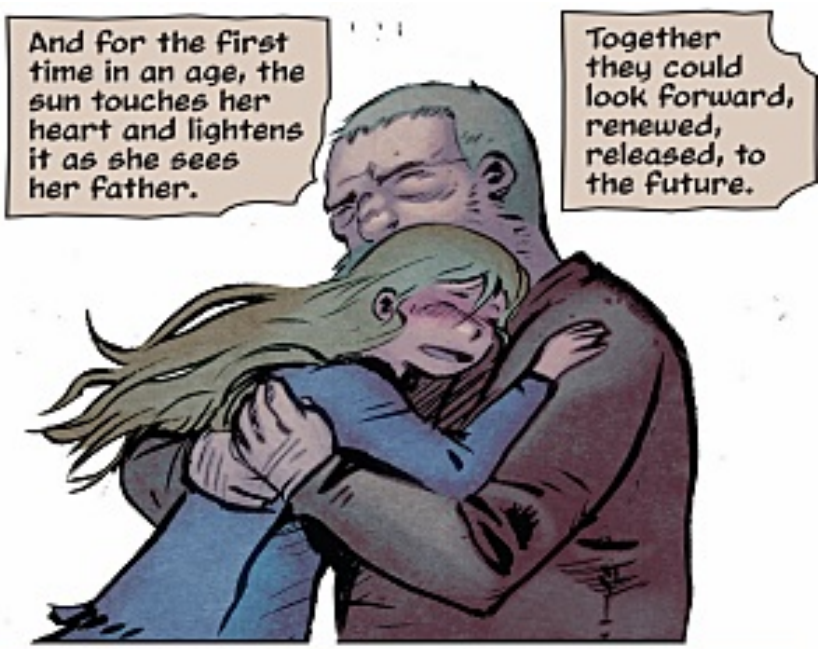

YOU, SIR, ARE BABA YAGA'S SERVANT.
YOU ARE HER *DARKNESS*, HER DEEPEST NIGHT.
AN OFFERING, A LITTLE BEARER OF LIGHT.
A RIDDLE! ANSWER AND GO FREE. DON'T AND MY HORSE WILL TRAMPLE YOU TO BLOOD-STAINED STRAW UNDER ITS HOOVES.
WHO AM I?
YOU, SIR, ARE BABA YAGA'S *DAWN!* YOU ARE THE SILVER OF HER MORNINGS.
CLEVER GIRL, BABA YAGA'S GIRL. I WILL SHORTEN YOUR WAY.

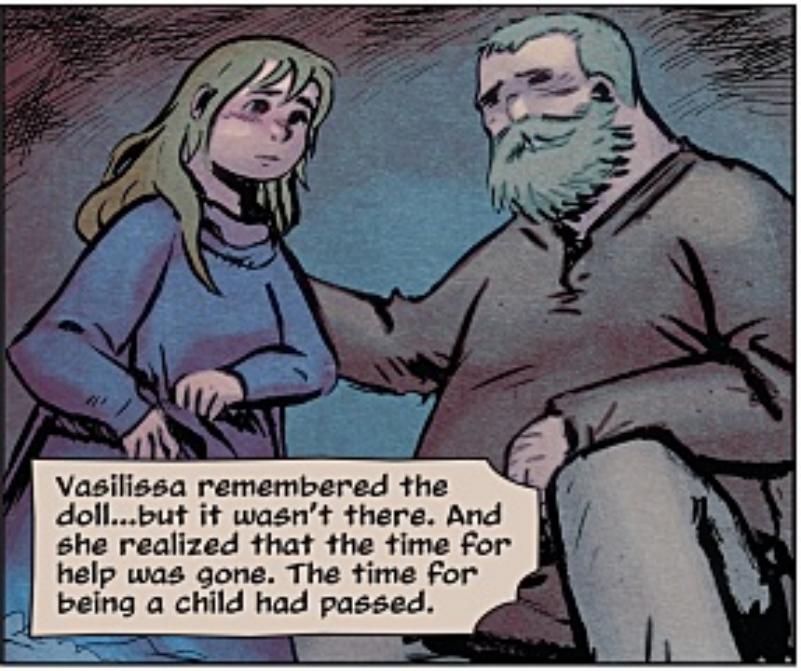
WHO AM I?
YOU, SIR, ARE BABA YAGA'S DAY!
YOU ARE THE WARMTH OF HER NOONS.
TRULY BABA YAGA'S GIRL! COME UP AND I WILL SHORTEN YOUR WAY.
On and on they hurtle through the mist, hour after hour, before dawn's breaking...
...and the rider reins in at the edge of the forest and sets her down.
NOW FOLLOW YOUR LIGHT, MY LITTLE SISTER.

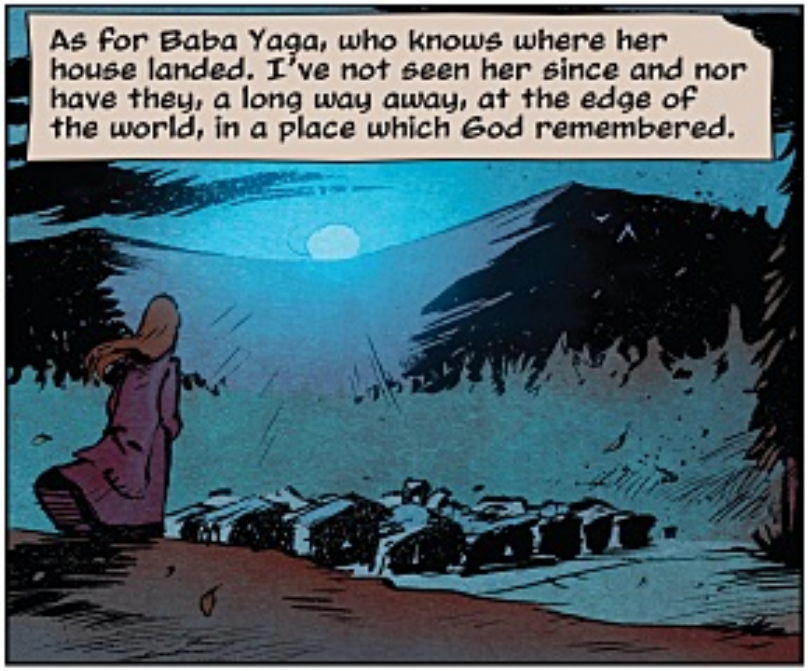


The gift of light. It *shines* in the darkness for some, but its eyes search out the blackest hearts and burn them to cinders.

Slowly, the dawn comes and finds Vasilissa. No more skull, no more bats.


And for the first time in an age, the sun touches her heart and lightens it as she sees her father.
Together they could look forward, renewed, released, to the future.


Vasilissa remembered the doll...but it wasn't there. And she realized that the time for help was gone. The time for being a child had passed.


As for Baba Yaga, who knows where her house landed. I've not seen her since and nor have they, a long way away, at the edge of the world, in a place which God remembered.

AND IS THAT THE SAME SKULL?
THIS? NO...
I USE THIS TO KEEP THE BREAD COOL!

THE END

FROM THE
Jim Henson
ARCHIVES

THE ORIGINAL, UNPRODUCED *THE STORYTELLER* TELEPLAY, "VASILISSA THE BEAUTIFUL"
WITH INKS FROM JEFF STOKELY'S SEQUENTIAL ADAPTATION.

THE STORYTELLER
a half-hour series for NBC
from the HENSON ORGANISATION

VASILISSA THE BEAUTIFUL

By SUSAN KODICEK and ANNE MOUNTFIELD

OCTOBER 10TH 1986

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7th Draft Revised by Anthony Minghella

SCENE:
HOMEBASE.

STORYTELLER:
Once upon a time, long winters ago, at the very edge of the world, was a village which God had forgotten. A few, lonely houses stood there fenced by a forest so deep and so dark that the sky stopped above it for fear of getting lost. Oh, from time to time fools wandered in trailing string behind them. But they never came back. The strings stayed behind to warn off the others while inside the moss grew untrodden, the strawberries unpicked and the firewood rotting where it fell. At night, as people drew the shutters, they heard sounds so horrible they would cross themselves and shudder. And they went to bed early for it was a place which light would not illuminate. The people would whisper to each other of a thing which lived inside the forest, a creature which had a name although no-one liked to name it. A name like the sound of retching, of disgust. Baba. Yaga.

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SCENE:
COTTAGE AT THE EDGE OF THE FOREST.

STORYTELLER (V/O)
Oh yes, my dearie-ohs, a forlorn place but not bleak, because lodged in the middle room of the middle house was a baby so beautiful the thin light looked for her through the shutters and lit her sweetness. There she is with her smile of honey and there the mother and father and never was a family more family. And this love warmed the village and kindled it. Such a precious thing turning over the pages of the days, growing, toddling, walking, running, all child, all wonder. Spreading happiness. The village child, little Vasilissa.

DURING THIS, PASTORAL SCENES OF VASILISSA GROWING UP. A TODDLER BY HER MOTHER AS SHE CARRIES AWAY THE PAILS OF MILK. WITH HER FATHER AS HE REAPS THE CORN. LIT BY THE HOT FLAMES OF A BONFIRE AT THE HARVEST. A GIRL OF SEVEN OR EIGHT PLAYING WITH A POPPY DOLL. LIFTED UP BY HER FATHER. SHE SINGS, A BRIGHT CLEAR COUNTRY SONG. IT DRIFTS OVER INTO HOMEBASE WHERE THE STORYTELLER SITS.

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SCENE:
HOMEBASE.

STORYTELLER:
And so it goes, this harvest child blossoming, hair the colour of the corn. A child who sings. Hear her, untroubled, spilling

over with joy. Oh yes. Marvellous. (HE'S USING A SMOOTH SKULL AS A COMFORT, RUBBING IT'S BALD FOREHEAD) Until one day inside this warm home a snake uncoils and slithers out. (THROUGH ONE OF THE EYES, A GRASS SNAKES EMERGES, WINDING OUT)

DOG:
Ugh.

STORYTELLER:
For this is a place God has forgotten and nothing good may flourish for long. Sickness comes and lays its cold hand on the mother's forehead. A wasting thing, sucking out the life in her. And poor Vasilissa sits at her sickbed, bewildered and grieving. The father and child sorrow through the nights their long vigil. Time is marked by the opening and closing of the shutters, but there's no shutter that will keep death out if it comes to visit.

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SCENE:
VASILISSA'S COTTAGE.

WE ARE IN THE BEDROOM. MOTHER LIES, WEAK. VASILISSA AT THE BED, FATHER SITTING BY THE FIRE.

MOTHER:
Father will look after you.

VASILISSA:
(CONFUSED) You look after me.

MOTHER:
Always. Always.

FATHER: (SOOTHING)
Ssssh.

MOTHER:
(FISHING OUT A DOLL FROM UNDER HER PILLOW)
This is for you. Keep it close.

VASILISSA:
I don't want a doll. I want you.

MOTHER:
Whenever you need help, feed her. She'll be your guide.

FATHER:
Come away now, love. Your mother's got to rest herself.

MOTHER:
No, no. It's all right. It's all right. Come close, both of you, and sit by me. That's nice. Is it cold? I feel so cold.

FATHER GLANCES AT THE FIRE. IT BURNS FIERCE AND HOT.

FATHER:
I'll go build it up.

WE GO WITH HIM TO THE FIRE. HE STOKES IT WITH THE POKER. THE FLAMES SPARK AND FLICKER.

VASILISSA:
Mama?

FATHER LOOKS ROUND. MOTHER HAS CLOSED HER EYES.

VASILISSA:
Mama?

STORYTELLER: (V/O)
(SINGING QUIETLY).
Sorrowstones, sorrowstones,
tears and many a sigh.
Aching hearts and weary bones
'till the well runs dry.

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SCENE:
A GRAVE.

FATHER FIXING A SMALL ANONYMOUS HEADSTONE. VASILISSA BESIDE HIM. THE WIND ATTACKS THEM, FOREST FOREBODING IN THE DISTANCE.

STORYTELLER (V/O)
Such cruelty makes you wonder, where it comes from. Vasilissa gazed out at the dark forest and decided cruelty lived there in that damp black place. And it was as though her mind went underwater. (TIME PASSING IS SHOWN BY A SUCCESSION OF BOUQUETS LANDING ON THE GRAVE, WILTING, BEING REPLACED) The years passed but she hardly noticed. Christmas, birthdays (OLDER, SHE THROWS FLOWERS ON TO THE GRAVESTONE) anniversaries drifted by as so many clouds until one day cruelty crept out again from the forest and yanked her head up. Her father met a widow. He had done with grieving and he wanted a wife again to warm his back nights and mind his daughter. But what a choice, my dearies! A bat, a reptile, a painted thing, flapping into Vasilissa's life with her two reptile daughters. Cold walked in with them and underneath their honey and treacle and "Darling Vasilissa" our pretty felt their poison leaking out. As she sat in the back room and sewed ribbons into the bat's wedding dress she could hear the hisses of her new family in the front. "Pretty, pretty' they hissed 'Nice, nice'. And 'Just you wait!'

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SCENE:

A VILLAGE WEDDING.

PASTORAL SCENES. FOLK DANCING LED BY FATHER AND NEW WIFE. THEY DANCE THROUGH AN ARCH CREATED BY THE OTHER DANCERS AND CONNECTED BY THE TWIRL OF STRAW DOLL PUPPETS HELD ALOFT. VASILISSA WATCHES, EXCLUDED. THE TWO STEP SISTERS, MALEVOLENT, DANCE PAST THEIR NEW SISTER.

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SCENE:
VASILISSA'S COTTAGE.

SCENES OF VASILISSA WASHING, CHOPPING WOOD, COOKING. IN THE PARLOUR, THE SISTERS AND MOTHER SIT FEEDING THEIR FAT FACES.

STORYTELLER:(V/O)
And so the bats settled in their new roost and fed their fat faces while Vasilissa wore her knuckles white with scrubbing and scouring and sewing and serving. And father found no warmth for his back but bent it to the unyielding earth for now there were five mouths to feed and what appetite the bats had! Feed us! they ordered. Bloated, they filled the tiny house, squeezing father and daughter out. And each scrap the bats ate fueled their hatred for the beautiful girl. What fat hate they had for her clear eyes, her sweet mouth, her delicate hands. They dreamed fat dreams of her pretty fingers festered with blisters, her eyes red with weeping, her mouth twisted in sorrow.

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SCENE:
BEDROOMS.
THE SLEEPING BATS: TALKING IN THEIR SLEEP.

SEVERALLY:
Wash my clothes!
Cook my dinner!
Sweep the yard!
Fetch the water!
Iron the house!
Sweep my food!
Cook my clothes!
Feed me! Feed me!

VASILISSA'S ROOM

STORYTELLER:(V/O)
And Vasilissa lay and listened to their gloating. From her window she looked up. All the sky. And looking down. All the earth. And across to the dark, menacing forest. Oh dearies, never was a girl so burdened. She prayed. But this was a place God had forgotten. At the edge of the world.

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SCENE:
LATER, THE COTTAGE.

STORYTELLER (V/O):
The two fat, bat sisters grow up. They swell into young women sniffing for husbands. And indeed men come knocking at the cottage door, but it's not the bats they seek but the beauty who sweeps and sews and scours and scrubs, the sweet Vasilissa who never complains but sings her clear song which brings the boys a-courting.

THE BATS OPEN DOORS TO GENTLEMAN CALLERS. THEY LOOK PAST TO VASILISSA, ANNOUNCE THEIR INTENTIONS. THE DOOR SHUTS IN THEIR FACES.

****

SCENE:
HOMEBASE.

STORYTELLER:
And this goes on until the poison simmers up in the bats and drips from them. They can't sleep nights for nasty thoughts about what they'd like to do to their step sister. They brood in the dark with their mother and plan plans: to boil her; to smother her with her pillows; to wind her golden hair around her throat and pull and pull; to sit on her until the breath goes from her. They hate. And the hate makes them viler than ever.

DOG:
Grrr.

STORYTELLER:
Oh yes, dearies, the bats come up with a scheme. The mother sends father away on a journey and no sooner is he out of earshot than they set to work on their plot. Horrible.

****

SCENE:
COTTAGE, NIGHT.

THE BATS LOLLING. VASILISSA SEWING.

STEPMOTHER (GETTING UP)
It's bed for me. You two sweeties must be tired and all.

BATS:
We are, mummy.

STEPMOTHER:
Of course you are. Leave your dishes. Vasilissa will see to

them. And put out the lights. Leave one candle for the pretty one to work by. But not too much light, eh. Otherwise, she'll get so vain gazing at herself. Night, darlings.

BATS:
Night-night, mummy.

STEPMOTHER: (GATHERING THEM TO HER)
Kisses.

THEY SLOBBER ON TO HER. SHE WHISPERS.

STEPMOTHER:
And do what you must do.

SHE EXITS. THE BATS EXTINGUISH ALL THE LIGHTS, SAVE THE ONE BY THEIR STEPSISTER, THEN APPROACH THE TOILING VASILISSA.

BAT 1:
Alright, pretty one?

VASILISSA:
Thankyou.

BAT 2:
Sewing, are we?

VASILISSA:
Your blouse.

BAT 2:
That's nice. Isn't that nice?

BAT 1:
Very nice.

BAT 2 PUSHES OVER THE CANDLE. THE ROOM SUDDENLY GOES DARK.

VASILISSA (SHOCKED)
Oh!

BATS:
Oh dear, the light's gone out. Now what shall we do?

BAT 1:
I don't need it. Do you need it?

BAT 2:
I don't. I think the pretty one does.

VASILISSA:
It doesn't matter. I'll wait until morning.

BATS:

Until morning? That's no use. There's work to be done. (TUTTING) She's such a lazy.

VASILISSA:
Where will I find light?

BATS:
Where will she find light? So stupid. So stupid and lazy. In the forest, silly. In the deep, deep, dark, dark, terrible forest.

VASILISSA:(FRIGHTENED)
I can't go there.

BATS:
Can't? Can't? You can and you must. Go to Baba Yaga. She keeps the light. Go and ask her for it.

VASILISSA:
But she's -

BATS:
Can'ts and buts and don'ts. Listen to her! (UGLY) Out! Get out! And don't come back without light to work by. Or else! Think of all the things that hurt and add two and that's what will happen, madam.

AND SAYING THIS, THEY LIFT HER UP AND THROW HER OUT, SCREAMING AND CACKLING.

FROM HER WINDOW, THE STEPMOTHER GAZES DOWN AS VASILISSA BANGS VAINLY ON THE DOOR. SHE CHUCKLES.

STORYTELLER:
Poor Vasilissa. Inside: the bats and their poison. Outside: the forest where fear rules. What can she do? She bangs on the door until her fists are sore and bleeding, and then taking up her courage, she heads into the forest's black secrets, into it's trembling threatening dark, past the trailing threads that others have left behind them, past the first fringe of trees, past hope, past courage, past everything.

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SCENE:
THE FOREST.

WE FOLLOW VASILISSA'S FEARFUL PROGRESS INTO THE FOREST. SWAYING BRANCHES, SIGHS AND CRIES CONSPIRE TO TERRIFY HER. SHE FALLS. SHE GETS LOST. SHE GETS CAUGHT IN SLIMY ENVELOPING TENDRILS. THEN WE HEAR THE NOISE OF APPROACHING HOOVES. THE THREE HORSEMEN, BABA YAGA'S SERVANTS, APPROACH ONE AFTER THE OTHER. WHITE, RED AND BLACK. EACH THUNDERS BY AND COLOURS THE ENTIRE FOREST WITH WIPES OF THEIR PARTICULAR HUE. THEY SEEM HUGE AND

POWERFUL, PASSING SHAPES, HARDLY IDENTIFIABLE. VASILISSA PRESSES ON, PAST A BUBBLING, MURKY, BOG.

STORYTELLER: (V/O)
And what horror she found inside. Things for nightmares. Shapeless, lurking, watching her, touching her. But courage holds one hand, and in the other she clutches the doll her mother had left her, taken everywhere. She clings to it and presses on until she stumbles, falls and - reaching out - finds she has come to a fence made of human bones. She can't see. She can only feel...thigh bones, feet, arms, skulls...piled high and terrible. And beyond them she thinks she can make out the brooding outline of a tower, but it's not a tower. Then, for a brief second, the rolling fog which envelopes her thins out and reveals the strangest house she's ever seen...a ramshackle hut perched on a huge chicken leg. And without knowing she knows this must be the place where Baba Yaga dwells. And, oh my dearies, before she can decide what to do, a crackle and a creak and a thunder and a groan and the sky splits open and spits out the witch. So she comes, sweeping down in her mortar, brandishing her pestle, a shadow over the whole world.

DOG: (V/O)
(FRIGHTENED) Baba Yaga!

STORYTELLER (V/O):
Baba Yaga.

BABA YAGA (SNIFFING)
Someone's here!

VASILISSA, TERRIFIED, BACKS AWAY AS THE WITCH DESCENDS AND SNIFFS HER OUT. SHE FALLS AGAINST THE FENCE OF BONES, WHICH COLLAPS ON TO HER. BABA YAGA WALKS TOWARDS HER, MENACINGLY.

BABA YAGA:
A visitor! (WHISPERS) Chicken, chicken.

VASILISSA LETS OUT A TINY CRY.

BABA YAGA:
Not afraid of Baba Yaga, are we, chicken? Did you want something? (SWEET) Hmmm? (HARSH) Hmmm? I know what you want... you want LIGHT!!!

AND SAYING THIS, SHE PLUCKS A SKULL FROM THE FENCE AND INSTANTLY, IT PRODUCES A BLINDING BEAM OF LIGHT.

BABA YAGA:
If you want light, silent one, you must work for it. Hmmm? Look after Baba Yaga and it's all yours. Only we must do well, chicken, mustn't we? Because we know what Baba Yaga does to people who disappoint her? She has such a big appetite, she gets so hungry, sometimes she just has to have a little nibble of

person, a little chew, and then she spits out the bones, doesn't she, and there they lie. It happens so often and I'm so disappointed.

VASILISSA MAKES TO RUN AWAY. BABA YAGA STRETCHES OUT A HAND AND GRIPS HER IN A STEEL GRIP.

BABA YAGA:
No, no. Come back, chicken. Such a lot to do. Up we go to my little house. Such a pretty.

SHE MAKES OMINOUS SMACKING NOISES WITH HER LIPS.
PUSHING VASILISSA AHEAD OF HER, THEY CLAMBER UP THE LADDER AGAINST THE CHICKEN LEG AND MAKE THEIR WAY TO THE HUT ALOFT.
THEY DISAPPEAR INSIDE.

SCENE:
HOMEBASE.

STORYTELLER:
So we find her, poor Vasilissa, out of the clutches of her terrible family into the hands of the creature no-one likes to name. Up she climbs into Baba-Yaga's den, feeling the pant-pant, smack-smack, hot breath of the witch on her neck.

STORYTELLER STRETCHES OUT AND STROKES THE DOG'S FRONT LEG.

STORYTELLER:
" I'm SO hungry", says Baba-Yaga and a claw stretches out and tests Vasilissa's arm. "MMMmmm!"

THE DOG PULLS HIS ARM AWAY.

DOG:
Grrr!

****

SCENE:
BABA YAGA'S HUT.

THE WITCH AND VASILISSA ENTER THE HUT.

BABA YAGA:
Here: Baba-baba-baba-Yaga's little house. Gut.
Like it? (SNIFFS) Nice! Cosy! Warm! Comfy!
(SHE GOES OVER TO THE STOVE WHICH DOMINATES THE ROOM)
And here's my oven. For roasting chickens.

THE FIRE IN THE STOVE ROARS SUDDENLY FIERCER.
VASILISSA PARALYSED WITH FEAR. BABA YAGA HUGELY JOLLY.

BABA YAGA:
Nice fire. (SNIFFS, SMACKS HER LIPS OMINOUSLY) Don't be shy, pretty. Come close. Nice. Young. Tender. Nya. Nya.

SHE SITS DOWN AT HER TABLE AND POINTS AT THE STOVE.

BABA YAGA:
Now, feed me. Baba Yaga SO hungry.

HESITANT, VASILISSA GOES TO THE STOVE WHERE MANY CHICKENS AND VARIOUS ROASTS BARBECUE. SHE SERVES THE WITCH.
BABA YAGA EATS INSATIABLY. SHE CONSTANTLY SMACKS HER LIPS AS SHE GOBBLES DOWN EVERYTHING VASILISSA SETS BEFORE HER. HORRIBLE DIGESTIVE GURGLES. HORRIBLE SPITTING OF BONES AND GRISTLE.

BABA YAGA:
More. More. Nya! Nya! Feed Baba Yaga!

STORYTELLER:
And for what feels like hours, Vasilissa shovels food into the witch's mouth. Fat and grease dribble from her, bones, scraps of gristle, juices, all sucked in and spat out. And still she wants more.

BABA YAGA:
Always SO hungry. MORE!

VASILISSA:
That's all there is.

BABA YAGA:
(IRRITATED) Hmmm. (BELCHES, RESIGNED) Hmmm. (YAWNS) Now Baba goes to bed. And in the morning, we'll see about your light, chicken. But first you will clean the house and scrub the floor and wash my clothes and cook my dinner and set about a special task. (CONSIDERS) What's difficult? You can sort the weeds from the wheat in my grain bins. That's impossible. (YAWNS AND BELCHES) But if it's not done, I'll have to eat you. Such pretty soft flesh. Shall I chew a bit now? Just a taste? Or shall I wait until breakfast? (YAWNS A THIRD TIME, THEN REGRETFULLY) Breakfast.

AND WITH THAT SHE CLAMBERS ON TO THE TOP OF THE STOVE, WHERE HER NEST IS, AND SETTLES DOWN, FITFULLY, TO SLEEP. SHE PULLS AT BITS OF SHAPLESS RAGS UNDER HER, MUTTERING ALL THE WHILE.

BABA YAGA (MUTTERING):
Sort the wheat...nyaff, nyaff, smack-smack, sort it all out little chicken, mmmm nice, tender.....

THEN SNORES.

STORYTELLER: (QUIETLY, AS IF NOT TO WAKE THE WITCH)
At last Baba Yaga sleeps, in her itchy patchy darkness, her raggedy bed, and all stills, save for the occasional mumble, the odd smacking of lips, the heaving snore. And our little chicken lies down, exhausted, bewildered, clutching her doll tightly to her, too frightened to sleep, but desperate to. Huddled in the dark she comforts herself with memories of her mother, of days when the sun caught her out from the shadows. Oh dearies, what happy times. And then her thoughts stray to the most painful scene of all: the sick bed and her mother's pale smile and the terrible silence which had never broken. Her mother's words drift back, unbidden. Such a sadness...

WE HEAR MOTHER'S ADVICE ABOUT THE DOLL.

MOTHER (V/O):
Whenever you need help, feed her...

VASILISSA'S TEARS GLISTEN IN THE DARK. SHE LOOKS AT THE DOLL, THEN REACHES OUT TO THE FLOOR WHERE A HEEL OF BLACK BREAD LIES.

DISCARDED. SHE PICKS IT UP, CRUSHES IT TO CRUMBS AND OFFERS THEM TO THE DOLL.

VASILISSA (WHISPERING)
Litle doll - food for you.
Eat and tell me what to do.

STORYTELLER: (V/O)
And surely there's the doll nibbling the crumbs! And surely that's the mother's face she has on her, essence of kindness. And, imagining she imagines this, our pretty settles to sleep in an instant, hugged by love, embraced by peace.

THE DOLL'S FACE HAS INDEED TRANSFORMED. VASILISSA'S MOTHER'S FEATURES PLAY ACROSS IT AND THE DOLL GROWS INTO AN AMORPHOUS SHAPE OF LIGHT AND DUST. IT GENTLY ROCKS VASILISSA.

STORYTELLER: (V/O)
And such a sleep, so deep, so calm, so cossetted. Until the sun traces it's morning light on her face and gently wakes her. Our pretty's eyes open and look about her and up she starts, full of worry, Where's Baba Yaga? In sleep a princess, she wakes as breakfast. Oh no, and the work she must do, the impossible task. She jumps up and would you credit it? Everywhere's clean! Everything's tidy. Baba Yaga's gone. And going across to the bins: goodness! golly! and quite amazing! she finds the wheat, weeded, sorted, and sitting on the top, her precious doll.

****

SCENE:
HOMEBASE.

STORYTELLER:
All that's left to do is the cooking and Vasilissa sets about it with a light heart, her clear voice filling the room in song. And so the day passes, blessed, our pretty certain that when the witch returns she'll surely get her light. And now she has a secret, too. A comfort. A precious gift from her mother. Tra la, she sings, tra-la-la-la. (HE CONTINUES, BUT IS INTERRUPTED AS IF HE SUDDENLY HEARS SOMETHING) Tra-la-la...but then a huge sigh, a black cloud and the house trembles. It's her returning. The mouth. The stomach. The nastiness. In she glides, a spider to her web and finds her fly, her delicate Vasilissa, caught up in her silks.

A SPIDER CRAWLS OVER THE TOP OF HIS SKULL AND INTO THE EYE SOCKET. THE DOG JERKS AWAY, FRIGHTENED.

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SCENE:
BABA YAGA'S DEN.

SHADOWS BLOCK OUT THE LIGHT. VASILISSA STOPS SINGING. IN CLIMBS BABA YAGA, MUTTERING AND MUMBLING.

BABA YAGA (IRRITABLE)
Hmmm: tidy. Hmmm: clean. Hmmmm: smells nice. (OVER SHE GOES TO THE BIN, LOOKS AND IS AMAZED) Done it! Clever. Clever. Very clever. Sniff. (SUDDENLY SHE THROWS UP HER ARMS IN A SPELL)
Ho, my servants!
Take the wheat!
Take the wheat and grind it!

THREE PAIRS OF HANDS APPEAR...WHITE, RED AND BLACK. THEY SHAKE THE BINS, PRODUCE PESTLES AND GRIND IT, POUR IT INTO SACKS. THIS HAPPENS IN AN INSTANT. VASILISSA LOOKS ON, ASTONISHED. BABA YAGA SMUG.

BABA YAGA:
Gut gut. Clever Vasilissa. Clever Baba Yaga. (SHE LOOMS MENACINGLY OVER VASILISSA, SNIFFING, CONTEMPLATING A BITE) Now feed me, chicken. I'm SO hungry!

SHE SLUMPS AT HER TABLE AND THE FEEDING RITUAL BEGINS AGAIN.

STORYTELLER (V/O)
And what can our pretty do but obey? She daren't ask for light. She's trapped. She's cooked enough for forty men. Baba Yaga makes short shrift of it, chewing-spitting-grunting-dribbling, snapping at the hands which feed her.

A BLOATED BABA YAGA SLUMPS CONTENT SURROUNDED BY GREASY BONES. SHE THROWS ONE ON THE FIRE. IT FLARES UP.

BABA YAGA:
Hmm. Gut gut. I like this. Very nice. Baba Yaga sleep now. Such a busy day. Where's my chicken gone? Not sliding off, are we? No, no, we need her. Nya nya, we need a little chicken to feed us and tidy us and scratch us. Scratch here. (VASILISSA OBEYS) That's right. Scratch us till we fall asleep. Then we must tidy, chicken, and clean and there's another task for you. Someone's put dirt in my poppy seeds. Nasty. Clean them, precious, one by one.

VASILISSA'S TIRED FACE

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SCENE:
HOMEBASE.

DOG:
That's not fair. Another task!

STORYTELLER:
Nothing's fair in this place God has forgotten. Nothing's kind.

save for the doll, and that night our pretty feeds it again. "Little doll, food for you. Eat and tell me what to do". "Sleep" whispers the doll in the darkness, "Sleep". And Vasilissa's so tired she needs no encouragement. In a sudden she's asleep and dreaming. Such happy times she dreams of...a mother's arms, a mother's face, a lullaby. And waking, the works all done again...the house tidy, the floor swept, the clothes washed...and, golly gosh and quite amazing, in the corner one bin pure poppy seed, sweet and grey-blue as Vasilissa's eyes. The other, earth. Rich and dark. And sitting there, the corn doll. quite still. Oh, she kisses it, Vasilissa, and hugs it, and hides it in her petticoats, and sets about her cooking with a light heart. Until dusk and once again the sweeping black shroud of the witch stops her song with a shudder. Well, Baba Yaga, all muttering and mumbling, can't believe it. A spotless house, seeds sorted, supper cooked. She raises up her arms and beckons in the hands.
"Ho, my servants,
Take the seeds!
Take the seed and crush them!"
And sure enough the hands appear, white, red, black, and grind the seeds to a pure oil. And all the while Baba Yaga sniffs, restless, sniffing at our pretty, sniffing her arms throughout supper. "Gut, Gut" she mutters, but inside she's thinking "Bad, Bad"

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SCENE:
BABA YAGA'S HOUSE.

STORYTELLER:(V/O)
Besides, she's not quite full, there's room for roasted pretties, for barbecued cleverness, for grilled Vasilissa. I'll set a third task, she thinks, which the girl will never do. And when she gets it wrong I'll munch through that tender arm, I'll suck on that sweetness.

BABA YAGA:
A question, darling.

VASILISSA:
Yes?

BABA YAGA:
Not my question. Yours. Ask me anything, little chicken, little clever clogs.

STORYTELLER:
Now the thing with Baba Yaga's is you must never ask them anything. Questions are teeth to bite you with. Baba Yaga is a secret and cannot be divined. But who's to know? That little question mark curls at the end of their words and hooks them into the gaping mouth.

BABA YAGA:
Come on, chicken, don't be shy. Such a clever must have a clever question she's just DYING to ask.

VASILISSA HESITATES. SHE PULLS OUT HER DOLL AND GLANCES AT IT FURTIVELY. MOTHER'S FACE APPEARS AND SHAKES HER HEAD VIGOROUSLY.

VASILISSA:
No question.

BABA YAGA:
Oh, there must be. I insist you ask me something after working so hard. Wouldn't you love to know my secrets?

VASILISSA:
No thankyou.

BABA YAGA:
I INSIST YOU ASK ME A QUESTION!

A TERRIBLE WIND SWEEPS THE ROOM. THUNDER CLAPS. LIGHTNING.

VASILISSA:
I have none.

BABA YAGA:
What about your step sisters? Loathsome bats? Do you want to know about them? I'll show you.

AND WITH THAT SHE PUSHES SHUT THE DOOR OF THE STOVE AND CONJURES UPON IT THE INSIDE OF VASILISSA'S COTTAGE, WHERE THE THREE NASTIES SIT AND SHUDDER IN THE COLD AND DARK.

BABA YAGA:
There they are. Huddled together. Bitter cold. Sour cud. Weeks have passed since you left, you know. And no fire will light, no fuel will warm them. Foul things, they shiver and rage for your return.

VASILISSA DOESN'T COMMENT.

BABA YAGA:
And what about this?

THE SCENE ON THE STOVE DOOR CHANGES. VASILISSA'S FATHER STANDS AT THE EDGE OF THE FOREST ANXIOUSLY CALLING FOR HER.

VASILISSA: (WORRIED)
Oh!

BABA YAGA:
What?

VASILISSA:
Nothing.

BABA YAGA:
Nothing! What about your dear, dead mother? Want to know where she is? Hmmm? Hmmm? Want to find her?

VASILISSA HESITATES.

BABA YAGA:
(TRIUMPHANT) Yes? Nyaff. Nyaff. Yes, my sweetie?

BUT VASILISSA LOOKS DOWN TO THE DOLL WITH HER MOTHER'S FACE TRACED ON IT. THE DOLL POINTS TO ITSELF AND WHISPERS "I'm here. I'm here with you"

VASILISSA:
My mother is dead. And rests in peace.

BABA YAGA:(DISGUSTED)
What a stupid thing you are! What a terribly stupid thing! You'll never grow up! You'll never know anything! (SUDDENLY BORED) I'm tired of you. I don't like your sweetness. Get out and take your blasted light with you. More fool you for asking nothing. Get out and see if you can survive the journey home.

STORYTELLER:(V/O)
And thwarted and full of rage, she pulls Vasilissa down the ladder, down the chicken leg and drags her to the fence where she plucks a skull from a post and throws it to her.

WE SEE THIS.

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SCENE:
AT THE FOOT OF BABA YAGA'S HUT.

BABA YAGA:
Take it and be off with you. We're tired. We're bored with little chickens.

AND WITH THAT SHE FLIES UP TO THE HUT AND INSIDE. IMMEDIATELY THE ENTIRE STRUCTURE, CHICKEN LEG AND ALL, REVOLVES AND STALKS AWAY, LEAVING VASILISSA ALONE BY THE FENCE CLUTCHING THE SKULL.

STORYTELLER:(V/O)
No sooner has the witch disappeared, than all around her the Forest heaves and groans like a living thing and our pretty wonders if she has the courage to find her way home. Too many trials for such delicate shoulders. But then the skull begins to glow and shine bright tongues of light. And the way is cleared for her...gates opening, trees parting, branches lifted, fog

unravelling before her, and holding the skull aloft she sets off, gathering up all her strength.

****

SCENE:
THE FOREST.

STORYTELLER(V/O)
But the way is long and the journey hard and our tired girl feels she can go no further and the bog beneath her feet invites her down, down to it's smothering. And many times she falls and many times she despairs and just when she's about to surrender to the warm sticky deadly earth a terrible noise thunders towards her.

VASILISSA'S WAY IS BARRED BY THE BLACK RIDER. THE SKULL'S EYES DIM. THE FIGURE IS MENACING. HOODED. HUGE.

RIDER:
Thief!

VASILISSA:
No.

RIDER:
The skull!

VASILISSA:
It was given.

RIDER:
A riddle. Answer and go free.
(HE BENDS TOWARDS HER) But answer wrongly and my horse will trample you and tatter your skin till it hangs like white leaves on the bones of my trees. Who am I?

VASILISSA:
You, sir, are Baba Yaga's servant.

RIDER:
And?

HIS HORSE SNORTS, REARS, TERRIFYING.
VASILISSA GROPES FOR THE ANSWER, WORKING IT OUT.

VASILISSA:
You are her darkness. Her deepest night.

AGAIN THE HORSE REARS. THEN THE RIDER SCOOPS UP VASILISSA AND CARRIES HER OFF.

WE SEE BLACK HORSEMAN AND VASILISSA GALLOPING THROUGH THE DARKNESS, THE WAY LIT BY THE NARROW BEAM FROM THE SKULL. GRADUALLY THE NIGHT GIVES WAY TO THE FIRST LIGHT. THEN THE HORSE STOPS SUDDENLY AS IT ARRIVES AT A POINT IN THE PATH WHERE THE

WHITE HORSEMAN STANDS MOTIONLESS IN THEIR PATH.

BLACK RIDER:
(TO THE WHITE RIDER AS HE SETS VASILISSA DOWN)
An offering. A little bearer of light.

HE TURNS HIS HORSE AND RIDES SHARPLY AWAY. EVERYTHING AROUND THE WHITE RIDER GLOWS WHITE. HIS PALE FACE IS PRACTICALLY FLUORESCENT.

WHITE RIDER:
(CHILL VOICE)
A riddle. Answer and go free. Don't and my horse will trample you to blood-stained straw under its hooves. Who am I?

VASILISSA:
You, sir, are Baba Yaga's dawn. You are the silver of her mornings.

THE WHITE HORSE WHINNIES.

WHITE RIDER:
Truly Baba Yaga's girl. I will shorten your way.

AND SAYING THIS, HE PULLS HER UP AND GALLOPS AWAY INTO THE DAWN.

STORYTELLER: (V/O)
And for a second time, Vasilissa thunders through the forest, carried by a swift horse, guided by a sharp light, and all opened before them, giving way to their urgent progress. And what day there was hung above them until the white horse rears up short and stops before the motionless shape of the red rider.
And once again, our child is cast down at the mercy of restless hooves and a powerful voice.

RED HORSEMAN:
Who am I?

VASILISSA:
You sir, are Baba Yaga's day. You are the warmth of her noons.

THE HORSE REARS AND WHINNIES.

RED HORSEMAN:
Clever girl. Baba Yaga's girl. Come up and I will shorten your way.

HE PULLS HER UP ON TO THE HORSE AND THEY GALLOP OFF INTO THE RED MIST OF THE DAY.

STORYTELLER:
On and on they hurtle through the red mist, hour after hour, before night begins to settle and the rider reins in at the edge of the forest and gets her down.

RED HORSEMAN:
Now follow your light, my sister.

HE TURNS HIS HORSE SHARPLY AND GALLOPS OFF INTO THE WOODS. IT IS NIGHT. THE SKULL'S BRIGHT BEAM PIERCES THE DARKNESS.

STORYTELLER: (V/O)
And standing there, breathless, shivering, uncertain what to do, Vasilissa hears a voice, not from her doll, but seeming to come from the skull she holds aloft.
"I am the light they sent for. Take me in. Take me in"
And, resolved, putting her doll into her pocket, our Vasilissa heads, steadfast, at last, towards her home where the bats rule.

****

SCENE:
VASILISSA'S COTTAGE.

EVERYTHING DARK AND DISMAL AND NEGLECTED. COBWEBS AND ASHES. THE BATS, SILHOUETTES, HUDDLE MISERABLY BY THE COLD GRATE. BRIGHT LIGHT PASSES THE WINDOW AND THEY START UP. THE DOOR OPENS. VASILISSA APPEARS. SHE PUSHES SHUT THE DOOR AND LEANS AGAINST IT. LIGHT SHINES FROM THE SKULL SHE HAS COVERED WITH HER HANDS.

STEPMOTHER:
Where have you been, wretch!

STEPSISTER 1:
So long we had no light.

STEPSISTER 2:
So long we had no fire.

STEPMOTHER:
Now give it to us!

BATS:
Give it! Give it!

THEY APPROACH THE SHADOW OF VASILISSA WHO, FRIGHTENED, LETS GO OF THE SKULL. BUT INSTEAD OF DROPPING, IT HANGS, SUSPENDED, IN MID-AIR AND WITH A VIOLENT ROAR OF RAGE IT SENDS FORTH A BLINDING INTOLERABLE LIGHT. THE BATS SCREAM, TRANSFIXED. THE SKULL STARES AT THE GROUP, THEN THE BEAM OF ITS EYES GET NARROWER AND EVEN MORE INTENSE. IT FIXES THEM AND TURNS THEM BLACK, THEN WHITE, THEN RED. THE LIGHT GETS MORE AND MORE INTENSE UNTIL THEY ARE DISSOLVED.

TOTAL BLACKNESS.

STORYTELLER: (V/O IN THE BLACKNESS)

(GRIM) The gift of light. It shines in the darkness for some, but it's eyes search out the blackest hearts and burns them to cinders.

A GOLDEN FINGER OF LIGHT TRACES THE NEW DAY THROUGH THE WINDOW, TOUCHING THE MOTIONLESS VASILISSA WHERE SHE LIES, OVERCOME, ON THE GROUND. IT'S WARMTH REVIVES HER AND SHE LOOKS ROUND TO SEE THE ROOM EMPTY.

STORYTELLER(V/O)
Slowly, slowly, the dawn comes, golden, and finds Vasilissa alone. No skull, no bats, no stepmother. Just a warm light bathing the room, bringing spring in its hand. And our pretty stands up and for the first time in an age, the sun touches her heart and lightens it and, renewed, she sets about the dust and the ashes and the cobwebs and by the time her father returns her song carries to him at the edge of the garden and in he rushes, all joy, and lifts her up and swings her round and hugs her and hears her tale from top to toe.

WE SEE THIS REUNION OUTSIDE THE COTTAGE.

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SCENE:
HOMEBASE.

STORYTELLER HOLDS THE SKULL.

STORYTELLER:
And what a story it was, of dark, of light, of witches, and of bats. And when she came to the part where the skull worked it's grim magic, and lowered her voice, and lowered her eyes, she heard a sigh which came up from her father's boots and filled the room. " For every ounce" he said "which weighed upon your back, a thousand weighed on mine, and many's the night I've tossed and turned and prayed for the past. And now, at last, how blessed we are. For we can look forward, released, to the future." And how he laughed, and how they cried, and how they hugged and loved each other. And then Vasilissa remembered the doll. She dug deep into her pockets. But...what?...where?...it's gone! And then, of course, she realised, that the time for help had passed. That the time for being a child had passed. Spring was a-coming in, birds were singing and it wouldn't be long before the young men came beating a path to the door. And as for the Baba Yaga, who knows where her house landed, I've never seen her since and nor have they, a long way away, at the edge of the world, in a place which God remembered.

DOG:
And is that the same skull?

STORYTELLER:
This? No. I use it to keep the bread cool.

AND WITH THAT HE FLIPS OFF THE FOREHEAD AND REVEALS A LOAF, WHICH HE BREAKS IN TWO AND SHARES WITH THE DOG. DISCARDED AND UNOBSERVED, THIS MAKESHIFT BREAD BIN BEGINS TO GLOW UNTIL IT'S LIGHT FILLS THE SCREEN.

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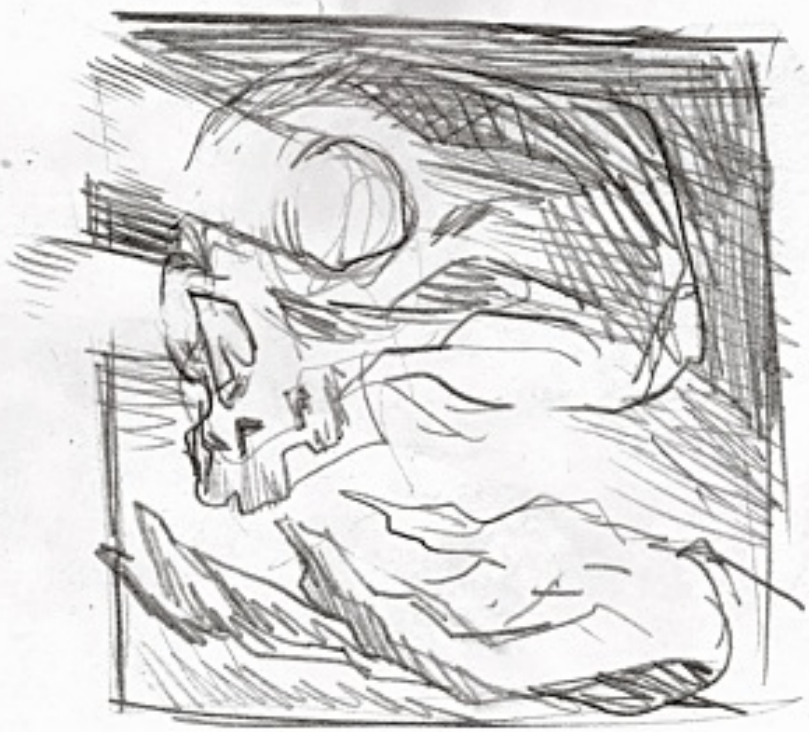

TALE ONE VARIANT
MISSY PENA

the STORYTELLERS

S.M. Vidaurri was born and raised in northern New Jersey. He received a BFA in Illustration from the University of the Arts, in Philadelphia. He is the author and illustrator of the graphic novel, *Iron: Or, the War After.*

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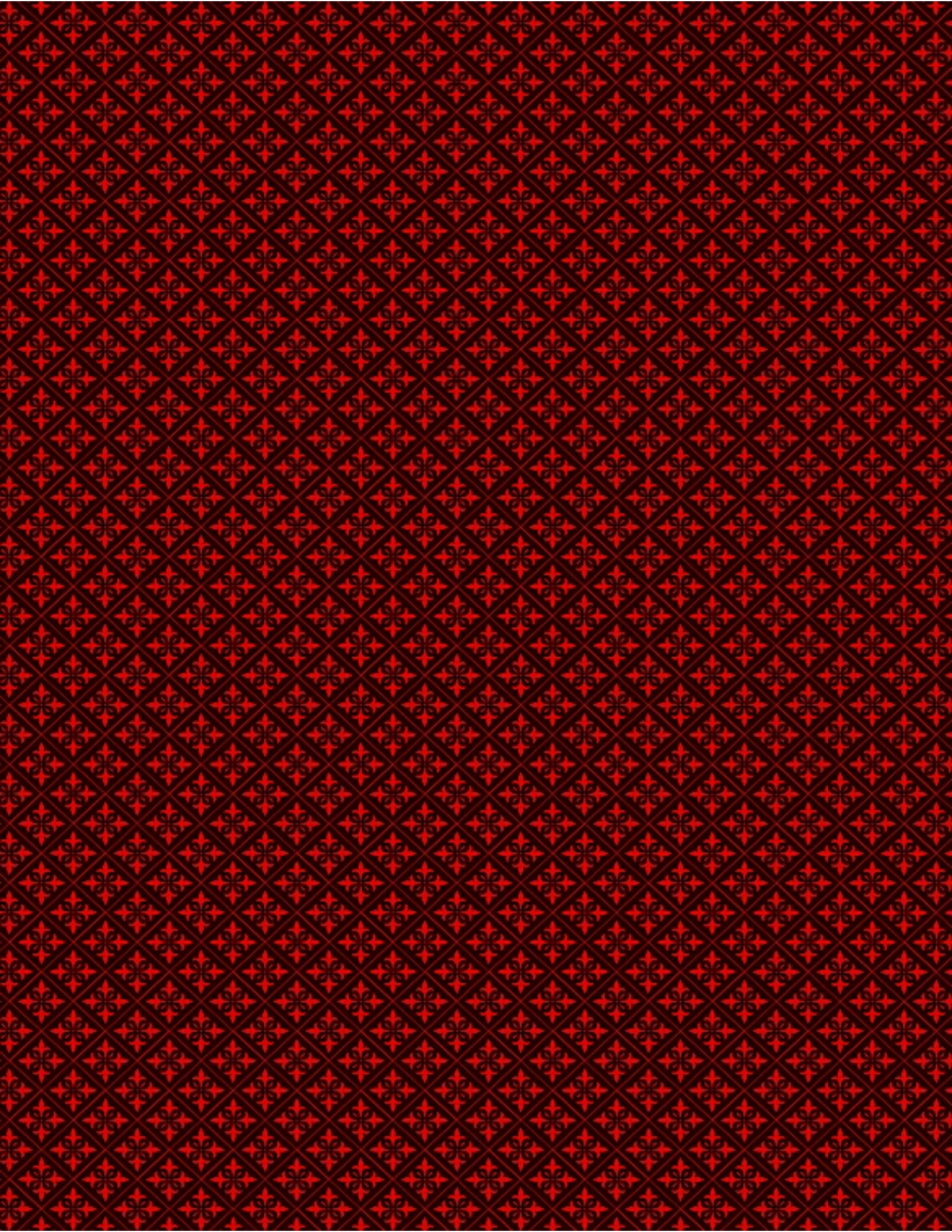

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